

# Going Zen

By Margie Grace  
Owner & Lead Designer,  
Grace Design Associates, Inc.



Photo credit: Holly Lepere Photography

A beautiful object, strategically placed, brings a surprising moment of harmony.

When I designed my first large-scale Zen garden, we were fortunate to have a large space and budget, beautiful antiques, and the client's permission to create freely. Apparently, the UPS guy rests there every time he makes a delivery — a sure sign of success, as those guys never stop moving.

However, not everyone has antiques, large budgets, or ample space. Don't despair. At our garden design/build studio, we incorporate Zen elements into gardens of all styles. You too can have a quiet, contemplative place, regardless of space or budget limitations.

## Who Started Zen Gardens?

Asian Zen Buddhist monks in the 14th century created austere gardens for meditation and contemplation of natural beauty, featuring raked sand and rocks.

As the centuries unfurled, Zen gardens evolved with the addition of ponds, bridges, lighting, sculpture and carefully selected plants. Throughout the centuries, Zen gardens are based on reverence for nature, simplicity, and an unfolding depth and complexity upon contemplation.

## Creating Your Own Zen Garden

With little to no budget and a dash of creativity, you can create your own Zen garden, or incorporate Zen garden elements into your existing garden. Key elements include:

**Stone** — This is the structural basis for the Zen garden. Boulders are "islands," slabs of moss rock a bridge or bench, stepping stones indicate pathways.

**Pebbles** — Asian gardens favor river rocks of all sizes, and cobbles from pea-sized to several inches across. They cover the ground, serve as a base plane for art, and define pathways.

**Sand and Fine Gravel** — A metaphor for water, use these elements to compose a dry streambed, a small raked bed in the ancient tradition or a foundation for a fountain.

**Bamboo Fences and Panels** — From simple to elaborate, use bamboo to enclose the garden, define an entrance or create a backdrop for another garden element.

**Water** — Create a small pond, stream, waterfall or fountain with stones and an inexpensive recirculating pump. Consider a hollowed out rock or container of carved stone, ceramic or bronze to catch water and attract wildlife.

**Pagoda Lights** — Originally made of carved stone to hold oil lamps or candles, pagoda-shaped lighting instantly broadcasts "Asian garden."

**The Buddha** — Whether simple cast concrete or more elaborate carved stone, ceramic or metals, nothing asserts Asian design more definitively.

**Plants** — Zen gardens feature carefully selected plants that add intrigue, color and texture, and mark seasonal change. Azaleas and cherry blossoms define spring, Japanese maples are glorious in fall. The rest of the year the gardens are noticeably lacking in flowers, with the emphasis shifted

to sculptural evergreens and moss, which cool the air in summer (and spotlight snow beautifully in winter).

**Interesting Objects** — Bird feeders, bamboo wind chimes, statues, ceramic or metal urns — a thoughtfully placed object or two completes the scene.

## Pulling It All Together

Select the area for your Zen garden niche, and begin with the larger features — boulders, water element, bamboo, larger plants, benches, and pathways. Decide where these will be placed. Once installed, work in the other design elements. You will find this easy to do once the larger pieces are in place.

If you want to just add a Zen garden note, consider cobbles of various sizes grouped under existing plants, pagoda lamps, a Buddha statue, moss or a bamboo screen.

Anyone can "go Zen" in their garden, no matter how large or modest the available space, and no matter the overall design style. When you feel that calm fall over you as you rest in your Zen space, you will know you've brought this 700 year-old tradition alive once again.

*Margie Grace is owner and lead designer of Santa Barbara-headquartered Grace Design Associates, Inc. Her diverse portfolio of work can be seen at [www.GraceDesignAssociates.com](http://www.GraceDesignAssociates.com).*



Photo credit: Holly Lepere Photography

Cobbles of various sizes are beautiful anywhere, with the added benefit of keeping the weeds away.