

Gardens without plants

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Can you have a garden without plants? – a good question indeed. Many people's idea of a garden is somewhere to grow flowers, vegetables and fruit. Indeed one definition of a garden is 'a place set aside from the wilderness where the hand of the gardener works in harmony with nature to cultivate for use and beauty'.

Yet some of the most famous gardens in history contained very few plants or none at all. The Zen Buddhist gardens of Japan are a classic example. The garden of contemplation within the precincts of the Daiju-in monastery, Kyoto (shown below) is the best known. It is no more than a stone walled enclosure, a floor of luminous quartz gravel and fifteen rocks in artfully arranged groups. No flowers, no trees, no water. The gravel is raked daily and no one, apart from the raker, may walk on it. Monks meditate on the scene from the verandah along one side.



Zen gardens have an extraordinary, peaceful beauty and a surprisingly emotional effect. They were created as an allegory of the soul's passage through the world to eternity. The care and skill that went into the choice, positioning and laying of the stone, gravel and other materials is hard to achieve in our busy technological lives, but, we be inspired to design creatively with hard landscape in our gardens.

A modern parallel is the work of US sculptor Isamu Noguchi, whose best-known landscape is the California Scenario (photo below). The Japanese influence can be seen in the flat plane of the pavement and the placing of the 'objects' upon it.



For your own perhaps more modest garden, two key questions are: what is the purpose of the garden space? and which materials best express the character you want to achieve? The purpose will determine layout and also the resilience and functional qualities of the hard landscape design.

Materials that reflect character range from 'found' natural materials (this means 'as they come' i.e. not processed in any way) including pebbles and boulders to highly manufactured products like concrete pavers and metal fences.

In New Zealand we have natural construction materials that express the character of the place. Ponga logs were traditionally used for walls and fences and seem so at home that they often take root and continue to grow. Boulders, pebbles and shells from the river and the beach remind us of the immense

ocean and powerful rivers that surround us. Rocks and boulders recall the strength and permanence of the earth below our feet.



These materials combine well with each other, thanks to their natural and complex colours and textures. They also look superb with plants - it seems that the mineral and the vegetable can bring out the best in each other.

As well as this natural affinity it is still good to look for harmonies and contrasts of form, texture and colour between plants and hard materials. For example, boulders and pebbles harmonise superbly with statuesque specimens such as *Aloe* and *Agave* and with plants of a grainy texture like *Raoulia*, mondo grass and *Scleranthus*. The photo below shows the work of landscape architect Ron Herman where the contrast between pebble, mondo grass and *Helxine soleirolii* is emphasized by the rectilinear arrangement.



Manufactured construction materials can compliment plants well. This is true of the more 'natural' ones such as clay pavers and tiles, of timber when it has weathered and mellowed, and of concrete if the colour and of the qualities of the aggregate are allowed to show through. All these are illustrated in the photo below of the superb work of Landscape Architect Isabelle Greene

The most highly manufactured landscape materials like plain or coloured concrete and renders, metals and plastics need much more care to look right with plants. These usually work best if the planting is restrained and contrast with the hard material. For example, a single, expertly trained small tree or shrub in front of a smooth plain rendered wall can have a startling effect – see below. This is known as 'projection' - like an image onto a screen.



So, as for my question about gardens without plants, the answer is certainly yes - a garden without any plants at all would be a garden of pure sculpture. Its colours and textures could be as varied as those of plants. It would capture or reflect the moods of the weather and the seasons and come to life as sunlight moved around it. But the combination of construction and planting is perhaps the most satisfying because of the balance and complement it gives the garden.