101 THINGS TO DO IN WEST SEATTLE

Visit China at the Chinese Garden

By Lori Hinton

Want to take a trip to China and never leave West Seattle? Venture up the hill from Delridge to the Seattle Chinese Garden.

Located on South Seattle Community College's North Campus, the Seattle Chinese Garden was conceived when Seattle became a sister city of Chongqing, China in the '80s.

"When it started, China was coming out of a cultural revolution and just opening itself up to the West," says Executive Director Kathy Scanlan. "And now, some 20 years later it is a burgeoning world power. It's very significant."

But the age-old Asian mystery remains. Just step onto the raked gravel path and step into a beautifully intriguing foreign land.

"Entering the garden creates an emotional feeling," says Mark Grant, garden manager of the Seattle Chinese Garden Society. "The evergreen bamboos form a natural covered walkway creating a feeling of security, like being wrapped up in a blanket."

Continue along the path — enshrined in Rhodies, Hibiscus, Don Redwoods, Japanese Maples and Canton Pines — and soon you'll reach The Song Mei Pavilion. The red, wooden Chinese structure was designed and fabricated in Chongqing and assembled in Seattle by a team of Chinese artisans. It features an intricately tiled roof with small bat designs around the edges symbolizing good luck.

Following the Sichuan style — lush, green, broad leaved and evergreen — the Seattle Chinese Garden also features a meandering pond. Look closely and notice the pond's water is not clear. This not a sign of neglect by any means, but rather a purpose built characteristic.

"The Chinese choose opaque water (preferably containing algae and silt), because if the water is clear it won't reflect the plants and trees surrounding it," explains Grant.

Around the pond you'll find reeds, lily pads, cattails and duckweed. And in the pond, you may find a fish or two too, if you're lucky. Also, find living, breathing creatures in the tree trunks.

"In a winter garden, look for trunk shapes," says Grant. "The Chinese often chose trees that resemble an old man or woman to create a human form within the garden."

Another Chinese style you will find here is the art of integrating rocks into the garden.

"When stones are integrated into the pathways, a visitor walking through is more connected to nature," explains Grant. "You are walking amongst the garden instead of keeping the garden a separate experience."

Each stone's shape is chosen for a reason.

"The flat stones tend to give people a feeling of relaxation whereas the more prominent or pointed stones send messages of energy or power."

But whatever you see in tree trunks, stones, lily pads or ponds, the authentic design leaves the interpretation of the traditional Chinese garden up to you.

"As you walk through a garden, there are things which change your mood. Your eye might not notice that the size of a leaf is the same as the size of the gravel, but your brain picks up on it and sends messages that alter your mood," says Grant. "But whatever it is, there is always a sense of mystery to a garden."

Prepare yourself for even bigger sensory experience to come. A four-plus-acre expanse of the garden is scheduled to begin next summer.

So tiptoe past the flowering purple plumbago. Witness the golden yellow leaves of the Ginko Biloba (which they say can make you smarter). Or take in the vanilla scent of the Sarcococca Roscifolium. You just might forget you're in West Seattle.

Matthew E. Durham

SONG MEI PAVILLION. Gus and Jean Hoehn of Dallas, Texas, visit the Chinese Garden at South Seattle Community College.

What:
Seattle Chinese Garden
282-8040

Where:
South Seattle Community College (located in North Campus behind Garden Center)

When:
Daylight hours year-round (please be aware that the garden will be under construction, ever changing

den.

By Bus-
Take #125

Tours:
The Seattle Chinese Garden at South Seattle Community College also offers free, guided tours complete with a slide presentation and discussion of the significance of gardens in Chinese culture. Call for more information.