

# Peace Garden

CHILDHOOD REFLECTIONS ON THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF FAMED ISAMU TANIGUCHI JAPANESE GARDEN

by Cari Clark

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**GROWING UP** in what now feels like the small town of Austin in the 1960s, I met a lot of colorful locals as a little girl. There was “the princess,” a woman who rode an old bicycle all over town, dressed completely in black. Try as I might, she wouldn’t talk to me, but I was fascinated by her comings and goings all the same. At Barton Springs Pool, there were always regulars having fun and carrying on intellectual debates while I perfected my front flips off the diving board.

My dad, Harley Clark, was a young attorney, and every Saturday I’d go downtown with him to the Piccadilly Cafeteria, where he’d meet a group of fellow lawyers and judges for breakfast. After we ate, he would go to his law office and I had the run of Congress Avenue. My first stop was usually an office building where I’d watch Cliff, the man in charge of the parking garage, move between floors on what looked like a giant motorized trapeze with footholds. He was always kind to me but (wisely) never gave in to my pleading to try it myself.

And then there was Isamu Taniguchi. My dad, who was in the Men’s Garden Club of Austin for years, respectfully referred to him as “Old Man Taniguchi,” I guess to distinguish him from his son Alan, who was the dean of the School of Architecture at UT. Although I knew that the younger Mr. Taniguchi was famous, he didn’t occupy a large space in my heart or imagination, but the older Mr. Taniguchi certainly did.

Old Man Taniguchi was the most interesting person in my 10-year-old world. I remember the first time I met him and how curious I was at his seeming otherworldliness. I had never met someone from Asia before, and he looked completely different from anyone I’d ever known: small and sinewy, with soft leather-like skin and the most exceptional twinkle in his eyes and an easy smile.

The fact that he was from Japan, had a thick accent and, as my father explained, had been rounded up by the Americans in 1941 and put into a detention center in South Texas made him infinitely fascinating. And most important to me, he built what we now know as the Isamu Taniguchi Japanese Garden in Zilker Park, but back then, I knew it simply as “my” beloved garden, a spellbinding place where I felt at home.

While my father attended his garden club meetings, I had hours of unstructured time to daydream and explore. I often had Mr. Taniguchi’s garden to myself, and no one seemed to notice when



I’d lie down in the streambed, letting the water flow over me as I’d gaze up at the trees. I explored every path, amazed by all the plants; it truly was my secret garden. Only later did I realize that most everyone who strolls through it, especially children, feels that way. I always knew it was magical, but as a child, I had no idea it was intentionally Zen.

Isamu Taniguchi was born in Japan in 1897 and immigrated with his parents and brother to California at the age of 17. He became a very successful tenant farmer, started a co-op and developed a breed of tomato that could be shipped to the East Coast. Not long after the attack on Pearl Harbor, widespread anti-Japanese hysteria took hold, and more than 120,000 citizens were incarcerated, including the Taniguchi family.

While Isamu, his wife and sons were eating lunch at their home one day, there was a knock on the door, and two officials entered and arrested him as an “enemy alien.” He was interned in one detention camp after another, finally being sent to a camp in Crystal City,

Texas, where he was reunited with his wife. He not only lost years of his life behind a fenced camp in dry South Texas, but also lost his livelihood; when he left California, his farm and equipment were pillaged. While the Taniguchis were interned as a threat to the United States, their college-age sons were recruited to serve in the U.S. Army. (More than 4,000 served the very country holding their fathers captive.)

When World War II ended, Isamu and his wife were released from the internment camp, and eventually, he retired to Austin, where his sons were living. Exceptionally industrious, he had a lot of energy for a man nearing 70. He had been schooled in the “art and Zen” of horticulture and wanted to create a Japanese garden for his new hometown and as a gift to Austin for educating his two sons at the University of Texas.

In the mid-’60s his son Alan was busy as an architect working with Austin’s Parks and Recreation Department to design the trails around Town Lake (now Lady Bird Lake). Through Alan’s connections, the city turned over a hilly, rocky section of parkland to his father. Deeply affected by the war and his internment, Isamu Taniguchi wished to restore balance and give Ausintites a place of reflection and peace after so many years of racial discord and conflict.

Mr. Taniguchi created his garden — mostly by himself, in an astonishing 18 months — using one little sketch. The ponds would spell out “Austin,” and he would incorporate themes of the Orient that symbolize peace. At the age of 67, he worked daily and created — by hand — the paths, the ponds, the waterfall, the streambeds and the arched bridge, which is a “Togetsukyo,” or “bridge to walk over the moon.” In 1969, his garden was opened to the public.

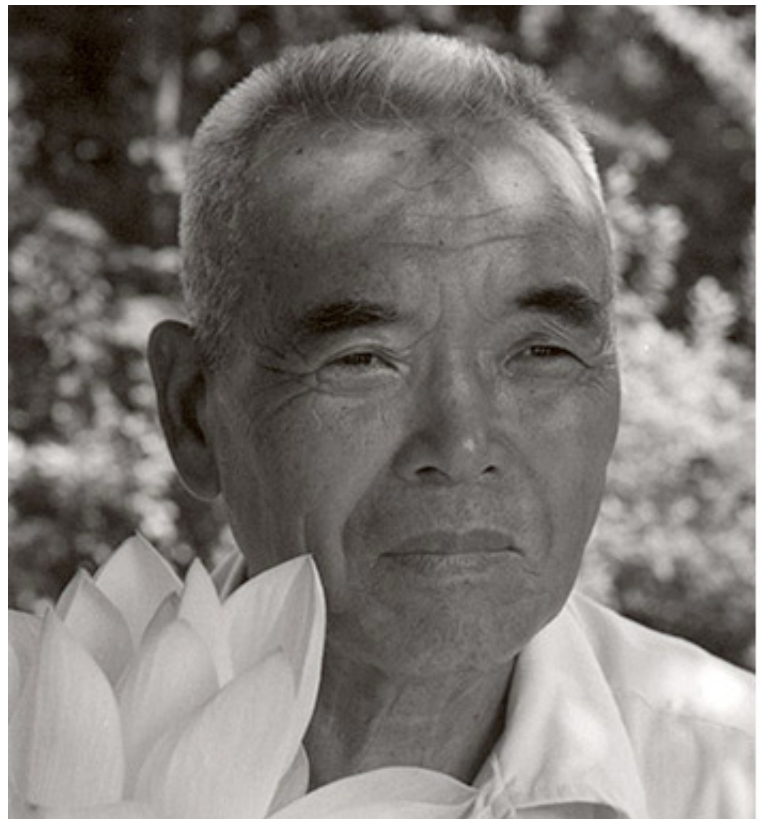
It is true that Mr. Taniguchi created the garden by himself, but he wasn’t completely alone in his work. As my father recounted to me, Mr. Taniguchi felt a kinship with the tallest tree on the hillside, which he called Mother Tree. Working daylight to dusk, he came to depend on the tree not only for shade but also for companionship and encouragement; he used to say she spoke to him, urging him on as he broke and placed rocks for the paths and ponds. When the garden was finished, the ponds filled with water, the bridge and teahouse built, he waited for her to talk to him again but she never did. Her work was done. His beloved Mother Tree had died and given her spirit to the garden.

You have to hunt for it, but Mother Tree’s remains are there, her beauty and strength striking. Mr. Taniguchi tended the garden for many years before he passed away, in 1992, at the age of 95. His spirit is still there, too, one reason why, after 50 years, the garden remains one of Austin’s most magical places.

In 2015, good folks, including former Mayor Frank Cooksey and Evan Taniguchi, an Austin architect and Isamu Taniguchi’s grandson, created the Zilker Botanical Garden Conservancy to ensure that the gardens continue as one of the city’s crown jewels. I am incredibly grateful to have known Mr. Taniguchi and Mother Tree. Every time I’m in the garden, I can feel both of them there.



“ IT HAS BEEN MY WISH THAT THROUGH THE CONSTRUCTION OF THIS VISIBLE GARDEN I MIGHT PROVIDE A SYMBOL OF UNIVERSAL PEACE. – ISAMU TANIGUCHI



*Image courtesy of Austin American-Statesman, Austin History Center.*