Korean Buddhist temple gardens encapsulate the many elements of spiritual belief that have influenced them over the centuries.

When I wrote about Confucian scholarly gardens in South Korea in ‘Poetry and Plum Blossom’ in HGR 39, I concentrated on surviving gardens of the Joseon dynasty which mostly date from the 1,500s. This time, I am going to describe the much older gardens which surround major Korean Buddhist temples, several of which date back more than 1,000 years.

Buddhism came to Korea from India via China in AD 372. By the time of the Unified Silla dynasty, almost 1,000 years later, it had become the state religion and remained so until Neo-Confucianism supplanted it around the mid-1300s during the Joseon dynasty, which ran for 700 years until the early 20th century.

Over the centuries the numbers and political power of Buddhist monasteries may have fluctuated, but their cultural influence has been continuous for at least the last 1,400 years, and others have 1,000-year histories. The gardens of these venerable temples display a remarkable number of common features.

The siting and construction of early Korean Buddhist temples were modelled closely on Chinese temples and followed Chinese feng shui principles, but the Koreans soon developed their own unique set of geomantic principles known as pungsu. Pungsu mandated that the temples and their gardens should be sited on the lower slopes of significant mountains, be protected on three sides by additional mountains, always have permanent sources of flowing purifying water and should do as little damage to the original topography of the site as possible. Groves of trees were planted to block evil energy flows, and pagodas were placed so as to concentrate and enhance weak positive energy flows.

No one who has had the good fortune to visit one of the great Buddhist temples at dusk and to listen to the ancient temple-closing chants and drumming will ever forget the experience. As the clouds roll down the surrounding protective mountains like the closing curtain of a dramatic performance and the music reverberates through your own body and the whole landscaped valley, you will be in no doubt that the application of these pungsu principles leads directly to the creation of profoundly beautiful temple gardens. All of these geomantic principles, first applied to Buddhist temple gardens, were later applied to palace, tomb and Confucian scholarly gardens throughout Korea.

Surprisingly, given Korea’s turbulent history and the practice by some temples of training fighting monks to defend the homeland, the old temples are never fortified or even enclosed. Their gardens simply shade off into the surrounding forest and it is almost impossible to discern where cultivation ends – except in autumn or if you have a drone and can obtain an aerial view.

The exact mix of trees found in the cultivated forests surrounding the temples is influenced to some extent by geography. Thus Woljeongsa, located in the cold high mountain area of Gangwon-do province, is surrounded predominantly by fir trees, whereas temples further to the milder south tend to have forests with more broad-leaved and deciduous trees. Bongjeongsa temple in Gyungsangbuk-do province has an oak forest, Haeinsa in Geongsangnam-do province has a mixture of Korean red pine and deciduous trees, and Songgwangsa temple in Jeollanam-do province is surrounded almost entirely by deciduous trees.

However, there is no doubt that the monks assist Nature in her selection to encourage splendid stands of both useful timber and symbolic trees. Most Buddhist temple buildings are wooden and require constant renewal after fire or other damage. It is not uncommon when visiting temples to hear the sound of sawing, chopping or hammering, or to smell the beautiful scent of fresh sawdust in the air, as this process of temple building and renewal continues.

Pilgrims and visitors to the temples are encouraged to approach them on foot by ritual pathways, which usually meander through managed forests. Although the trees are obviously selected and tended, they are rarely planted in straight avenues but rather are less formally arranged in the older, more sylvan, tradition. Many of the oldest trees will have heaps of pebbles forming little pagodas deposited within the crevices of their roots by passing pious pilgrims. These ritual pathways are never straight and always lead uphill, and so could be seen as a metaphor for the difficult progress towards enlightenment. Often symbolically cleansing flowing water is crossed more than once.
Gateways to Enlightenment

They usually pass through several lavishly decorated gateways. The number varies from temple to temple but commonly there will be an iljumun or ‘one-pillar gate’, or a geumgangmun or ‘diamond gate’ followed by a cheonwangmun or ‘four heavenly kings gate’. Much has been written about the significance of these gates in Buddhist cosmology but the point to grasp in relation to temple gardens is their role in marking the symbolic transition from the secular to the religious or spiritual, on the ‘path’ to enlightenment. Frequently they are not set into walls, but stand detached, so that it would be possible to walk around them rather than through them, which only underlines their symbolic significance.

Along the pathway between these gates you may find pagodas said to contain relics of the Buddha, or funerary stupas containing the ashes of famous monks associated with the temple. Also common are flower meadows – deliberate clearings in the forest where exotic plants have been removed and low-growing indigenous plants are encouraged. These become joyous havens for butterflies, bees and other insects.

Closer to the main temple buildings there are often cultivated meadows of more exotic ground cover. I once saw one that was a huge sheet of Shasta daisies in bloom under-planted with wild strawberries in fruit. Wonderful!

Closer to the main temple buildings there are often cultivated meadows of more exotic ground cover. I once saw one that was a huge sheet of Shasta daisies in bloom under-planted with wild strawberries in fruit. Wonderful!

At the end of the ritual walkway there is frequently a tranquil reach of water crossed by an arched or rainbow-shaped bridge, such as the lovely one leading into Songgwangsa temple in Jeollanam-do. Another example is the triple-arched bridge crossing the sacred pond in front of Songgwangsa temple in Jeollanam-do. Another example is the triple-arched bridge crossing the sacred pond in front of Songgwangsa temple in Jeollanam-do. Another example is the triple-arched bridge crossing the sacred pond in front of Songgwangsa temple in Jeollanam-do. Another example is the triple-arched bridge crossing the sacred pond in front of Songgwangsa temple in Jeollanam-do.

fanciful to suggest that these bridges and their reflections may be metaphors for the passage from the prosaic and ephemeral outside world into the contemplative higher realm of the inner world beyond.

Of course, the famous Buddhist temples all have vehicular access for delivery of essential services and to assist the handicapped, but it is no accident that tourist car and bus parks, as well as food and souvenir shops, are situated at a considerable distance away from and below the temples and their gardens. The whole process of walking up to a Buddhist temple through beautiful, peaceful woodland or forest and a sacred landscape, is designed to be a calming, meditative and mind-clearing process, and should be experienced as such.

A whole book could be written concerning plant symbolism in Korean poetry, art, architecture and garden-making. In Korean Buddhist temple gardens the preponderant symbolic plant is the lotus (Nelumbo nucifera), which is both cultivated and represented in paint, carving and statuary. These lotuses may in fact have been introduced from India via China, alongside Buddhism itself. Statues of Buddha may show him sitting on representations of lotus flowers, while temple buildings are often decorated with paintings and carvings of all parts of the plant: bud, bloom, seed heads, leaves, even cross-sections of the root tubers. Buddha’s birthday is widely celebrated by decorating temple courtyards with hundreds of paper lotus blossom lanterns, the mindful creation of which is regarded as a form of meditation.

While lotus symbols abound in temple decorations, other plants are also depicted. When visiting Buddhist buildings, always look up. The screens, structural rafters, ceilings and canopies within the major halls may well be superbly decorated with paintings and carvings of numerous symbolic plants. A glorious example is the ceiling in the Jeokmyeolbogung hall (where the Buddha’s bones are said to be preserved) of Tongdosa temple, which is covered with three-dimensional bands of richly painted peony plants and chrysanthemum blooms.

Other plants commonly depicted are plum blossom, persimmon fruit, bamboo, orchids, mushrooms and pine branches. Like the lotus, all these plants have symbolic significance; the art of painting stylised versions of them is known as dancheong and is a tradition preserved by monks.

Below: One of several bridges decorated with stylised lotus carvings crossing the cleansing stream on a ritual walkway to a Buddhist temple.

Unlocking the secret to Buddhist gardening

The gardens of the Buddhist temple are often more than just a place for reflection. They are a sanctuary for wildlife, providing a peaceful haven for butterflies, bees and other insects. The planting schemes are designed to achieve a balance between the natural world and the spiritual, creating a space that is both calming and meditative.

The temple gardens are typically surrounded by a series of gateways, each with its own symbolic importance. These gateways mark the transition from the secular to the sacred, guiding the visitor through a series of carefully planned spaces.

Along the pathway between the gateways, you may find a variety of plants and flowers, each with its own significance. For example, the lotus flower symbolizes purity and enlightenment, while the plum blossom represents perseverance and renewal.

The temple gardens are often designed to be a contemplative space, with clearings in the forest where exotic plants have been removed and low-growing indigenous plants are encouraged. These become joyous havens for butterflies, bees and other insects.

Closer to the main temple buildings, there are often cultivated meadows of more exotic ground cover. The variety of plants and flowers in these gardens is designed to be a calming, meditative and mind-clearing process.

The temple gardens are also a place of reflection, with statues of Buddha often sitting on representations of lotus flowers. Each part of the plant is depicted, from bud to bloom, seed heads to leaves, even cross-sections of the root tubers.

The art of painting stylised versions of these plants is known as dancheong and is a tradition preserved by monks.

The temple gardens are a place of beauty and tranquility, designed to guide the visitor on a spiritual journey towards enlightenment.
Most temple buildings are wooden and therefore flammable. This vulnerability affects the inner gardens. Mostly they are island beds within raked sand or gravel planes. Plantings are more restrained and formal than those on the approaching ritual walkways. Any trees are naturally small in stature and habit or, more rarely, cloud pruned. Due to the deep-seated reverence for mountains in Korean culture the old temples are built on platforms, which do no damage to the integrity of the mountains behind them. This necessitates the building of major retaining walls in stone, or stone tile and rammed earth.

Frequently any harshness in the appearance of these walls is softened by flower terraces known as hwagye. There appears to be no particular colour preference in these terrace plantings, but there is a clear preference for shrubs and plants that express the passage of the seasons – deciduous trees such as plums, magnolias, lilacs, viburnums and crepe myrtles which burst into bloom in spring, and smaller plants such as evening primroses, hydrangeas, cosmos, day lilies, aquilegias, pinks, irises, various daisies, narcissus, peonies, chrysanthemums, azaleas, clover, hostas and Boston ivy.

The main objective of the selection of plants in these flower terraces seems to be to mark the changing of the seasons and perhaps to re-enact the birth/life/death cycle common to many religions.

One final and unexpected element in most temple gardens is a small shrine to the pre-Buddhist Shaman deity, san shin, which literally translates as ‘mountain spirit’. These small, detached buildings (or gak) usually stand high at the back of the temple complex against a background of red pines, which are a symbol of longevity. They commonly house a painting of an old man, invariably accompanied by a tiger and a red pine, whether male or female, in Buddhist or Confucian garb, is almost certain to represent a san shin recluse who has retreated from the outside world, seeking enlightenment and immortality. Plantings in front of these shrines often include peach trees because peaches are one of the symbols of immortality.

The antiquity and cultural richness of many Buddhist temples in Korea make them well worth visiting. There is a remarkable consistency in the elements of the gardens surrounding them, which has persisted through many centuries. Sustainably cultivated forests, revered trees, ritual walkways, symbolic bridges and gateways, respect for nature and indigenous plants, and the choice of symbolic plants, all make such visits both enlightening and enriching.

Jill Matthews is an Australian horticulturist and landscape designer living in Sydney. She has travelled extensively in Asia, and is the author of Korean Gardens (Hollym 2018).