

The Mukai Garden Past and Present

By Bruce Haulman, Cindy Stockett, and Terry Donnelly

Vashon is home to one of the most unique Landmarked sites in the nation. The Mukai House and Garden, built in 1930, is a synthesis of two cultural influences: the desire of Japanese immigrants to be American and their desire to retain their culture.

The Mukai House is a traditional 1920's Craftsman Style home fronted by a mowed lawn, traditional American garden plantings, and a concrete sidewalk that leads to the house. B.D. Mukai wanted very much to live an American lifestyle, and his desire to be American is reflected in the Mukai House.

Immediately next to this traditional American house and garden is the Mukai Garden, a wonderful Japanese stroll garden originally bordered by many cherry trees. The Mukai Garden design was closer to Japanese gardens for a home and family rather than the designs of master gardeners that adhere to strict rules of tradition. The garden was designed to share with family and friends and to provide a venue for social gatherings. The garden is historically significant because it was created by a Japanese woman, Kuni Mukai. It is a synthesis of Japanese and American influences because Kuni used Japanese elements of earth, stones and water to form her design, and also used her knowledge of Northwest gardens. Kuni's desire to retain her Japanese culture is reflected in the Mukai Garden

Together the Mukai House and Garden along with the neighboring Mukai Cold Process Fruit Barreling Plant became a King County Landmark in 1993. The next year the Barreling Plant was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.



The Mukai Garden @ 1940 – Mukai Family Collection

The Mukai Garden at its peak in the 1930s and early 1940s was prominently featured in national newspapers like *The Christian Science Monitor* and on the front page of *The*

Seattle Times. The garden style is probably closest to a stroll garden, but it does not strictly follow the design elements of a stroll garden. Most likely because Kuni had to rely on her memories of Japanese gardens she may have seen near her home town of Yokohama, Japan and a few Japanese pamphlets and books that she brought with her when she immigrated. The term stroll garden is self-explanatory, but it rarely implies random strolling. Many are constructed in such a way that a visitor must move carefully and slowly through the garden, taking time to appreciate the vistas that the path provides.

Cherry trees played an important part in Japanese culture. The blooming of cherry trees is still anticipated and celebrated in Japan today. Kuni placed cherry trees in her garden and hosted outdoor tea parties, serving oysters on silver platters. These tea parties, celebrated the spirit of renewal that comes with spring. It must have been very enchanting for visitors to come at this time of the year. Her tea parties at Cherry Blossom time were a major Vashon Island social event in the 1930's and 1940's

The Mukai Garden consisted of a "Hill Garden" on the north end of the property. It was almost entirely surrounded by a pond with koi and even a small boat. This section of the garden is most recognizable today. The "South Garden" was equally lovely with a hill, landscaped with trees, azaleas, and conifers. It was also next to a beautiful pond and edged with flowering cherry trees.. Today this "South Garden" has suffered the most damage. The pond has been filled in and much of the hill destroyed.



Mukai Hill Garden, 2014 – Terry Donnelly

As can be seen in the 2014 Terry Donnelly photograph, the Garden is in serious disrepair and is in need of significant restoration. There have been numerous attempts to restore the garden in the past. 1995 was Vashon Allied Arts' year of the "Mukai Restoration Project." The project was funded by a King County Heritage Commission grant to do a restoration study and developed a Phase One cleanup and stabilization, followed by a Phase Two restoration and interpretation. Although this effort got off to a good start, it floundered and never developed. In 1999, Island Landmarks began an effort to purchase the House and Garden and to restore them. "The Mukai Farm and Garden: A Plan to Purchase and Operate the Facility" was developed, a Committee to Preserve the Mukai Farm and Garden was organized, and a Steering Committee for the Mukai Farm and Garden formed. A successful campaign to raise funds to purchase the House and Garden took place and in 2000 Island Landmarks purchased the House and Garden. Unfortunately, this effort stalled and little was accomplished to restore the garden. Island Landmarks did stabilize the House and Garden, and did attempt to develop the site, but lack of funds, internal dissensions, and a lack of clear leadership led this effort to flounder as well.

The current attempt to restore the Mukai garden began in 2010 with the formation of what is now the Friends of Mukai. For the past three years there have been court cases and negotiations to allow the restoration of the Mukai House and Garden to begin. Let us all hope that this current effort does not flounder like the past efforts.

On Wednesday April 23 at 7:00 PM at the Land Trust Building, Cindy Stockett and Karen Baer, members of the Friends of Mukai Garden Committee, will discuss this current effort to stabilize and restore the Mukai Garden. The talk, "Mukai Garden Past and Present," will cover the early development of the garden, the historical importance of the garden, the present state of the garden, and a brief history of the Marshall Strawberry and the Mukai strawberry business. This presentation is part of the series of programs sponsored by the Friends of Mukai.

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