

## A Short History of the Kubota Garden in Rainier Beach Seattle, Washington

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Most first-time visitors to the garden are amazed to find a mature 20-acre garden located in a residential neighborhood a few blocks from the southern city limits of Seattle. The story of the garden is also amazing. It is the creation of Fujitaro Kubota and his family and unique to the Pacific Northwest.

The historical and economic background:

The story begins in Meiji Japan, with the rapid westernization and industrialization there after the emperor was restored in 1868. New taxation and economic policies affected the farming class very harshly. Taxes were applied to land and had to be paid in cash. In a time of inflation, rice prices were kept artificially low and in the 1880's farming families all over Japan lost their land. There was a custom of working temporarily away from home and the Japanese government extended this permission to include the island of Hawaii where there was a desperate need for workers in the sugar cane fields. The field work was brutally hard but wages in Hawaii were about six times higher than in Japan. When the first 600 work permits became available in 1885, over 28,000 people applied. The Japanese government and the emigrants themselves viewed this time abroad as temporary. The workers were generally from farming communities and, because of the eight years of schooling provided in Meiji Japan, they were literate and, although poor, not destitute. They were expected to uphold the honor of their country abroad and to return to Japan when they were financially able to purchase a good position there. In fact, over 55 percent of the emigrants to Hawaii prior to 1924 did return to Japan.

During Mr. Kubota's early years, the immigration activity between Japan, Hawaii and the United States was complex and tumultuous. In 1882 the United States Congress had stopped Chinese immigration in response to anti-Chinese hysteria, but the country still had an ever increasing need for workers in the mines, the railroads, the sawmills, and the canneries. Japan was very conscious of the anti-Chinese activities in America and consistently sought to control emigration so as to avoid confrontation and international embarrassment. In

1886 Japan prohibited contract workers from immigrating to America; the government had a horror of the world seeing destitute Japanese nationals homeless on the streets of America. Emigrants were screened for disease in both Japan and America, had to have a certain amount of money in hand, and could not be destitute. In 1889 all males in Japan became subject to military conscription, however students and emigrants were excepted from this obligation.

In 1900 Hawaii was annexed by the United States and all Japanese workers with valid passports to Hawaii could enter the United States legally. Wages in the states were double those in Hawaii in 1900, and by 1904 over half of the Japanese immigrating to Hawaii actually traveled immediately to the United States. On the mainland, anti-Japanese activity began to build, especially in California. The combination of increased Japanese immigration via Hawaii and increasing anti-Japanese activity in the United States led to the 1908 "Gentleman's Agreement" which limited Japanese immigration to students, tourists, diplomats and the close family relatives of Japanese already in the United States.

#### Fujitaro Kubota's Early Years

In February of 1879, Fujitaro Kubota was born in Kochi prefecture on the island of Shikoku. The smallest of the four big islands, Shikoku faces the gentle Inland Sea on one side and the rough Pacific on the other. Mr. Kubota grew up facing the Pacific Ocean, separated from the rest of Japan by a chain of mountains, far from the centers of power and surrounded by the beauty of mountains and sea. The people of Kochi are sometimes called the "Texans of Japan" because of their energy, vigor, outspokenness and independence. Fujitaro's family were rice farmers and they were in comfortable circumstances.

Mr. Kubota attended an agricultural school and, as the first-born son, was expected to take over his father's position as head person in their village. He was 26 years old, married and with two daughters when he went to Hawaii in 1907. One story says that he did not like to eat rice economically extended with potatoes, another says that he did not enjoy settling the marriage disputes, debts and other village conflicts brought to him as his father's son.

To America

He left for San Francisco soon after landing in Hawaii and his timing was impeccable. In March of that year, President Teddy Roosevelt signed an Executive Order which prohibited Japanese from coming to the mainland from Hawaii. Mr. Kubota landed in San Francisco and traveled up the coast. This was unusual since most Japanese immigrants stayed in California where agricultural work was close at hand. In 1909, there were nearly 3,000 Japanese working in the sawmills in Washington State, one of them was Fujitaro Kubota. He worked at Selleck, near Black Diamond and was able to bring Mrs. Kubota to join him, family members being allowed to immigrate by the 1908 "Gentlemen's Agreement." About 1913, Mr. Kubota left Selleck and moved to Seattle where he operated and managed hotels and apartment buildings in Pioneer Square, what is now the International District, and Yesler Hill. His family grew to include two sons and two daughters, and he took the whole family back to Japan to visit. His business affairs prospered until the depression after the First World War when he lost his buildings with the exception of an apartment building which was also his home.

The Northwest economy was booming during the first years after Mr. Kubota arrived, and Seattle was growing rapidly. After the First World War, however, there was an economic depression, accompanied by an anti-labor and anti-immigrant reaction. Japanese workers were more often discriminated against, and Seattle's Anti-Japanese League agitated against competition from Japanese-owned businesses. At the same time, most labor unions excluded Japanese from membership. There were often fewer obstacles to starting a business than working for wages.

In the nineteen-twenties garden maintenance was one of the usual occupations of the Japanese immigrants. Mr. Kubota had some available time and some friends in the gardening business who needed some help. He worked with them for a while, discovered that he liked the work and in 1923 founded the Kubota Gardening Company. There was some general public knowledge about Japanese gardens in the Seattle area. Josiah Conder's book *Landscape in Japan* had been published in 1893 and Japanese gardens were featured in the various international expositions held at the end of the century. Well established trade contact between the Northwest and Japan had created some awareness of the Japanese garden arts. The Kubota Gardening Company prospered, and he was soon doing more than cutting lawns.

A Gardening Career

Fujitaro Kubota was a pioneer in bringing eastern gardening ideas to the Northwest. Interviewed by Mr. Ito in 1965 for the book *Issei* he said:

*I had not been trained as a gardener. After finishing grammar school, I went to the night class of a supplementary school where I learned only a little introductory botany. But American gardeners didn't even know about the three ingredients of fertilizers and about which plants grow in sun and which don't. I returned to Japan three times to study gardening which wasn't easy. In Kyoto I visited professional gardeners and asked many questions, but they wouldn't give me the most important part of their know-how. It was like the art of the tea ceremony and traditional dance in Japan which are taught in the rigid old family system. I knew a man in South Park - Ryotaro Nishikawa from Okayama Prefecture. His father loved gardens and so he learned about trees and plants from his father. He was particularly good at cultivating pine trees and came to help me whenever he had time. I would say he was my only gardening teacher, and no one else. Dozens of time I got stuck and was in trouble. Then I went into the woods and prayed to the gods for help.*

Mr. Kubota's gardening style was distinctive, featuring stone and a few carefully selected plants. He designed with mature plants so that a new garden would look complete immediately and his work soon became appreciated in upscale neighborhoods. Soon he had seven or eight maintenance crews and one landscape crew working for him. Still living on Alder Street, he had a lot where he heeled in his plants and stored the equipment but he started looking around for a bigger piece of land where he could show what he could do.

Property on Renton Avenue

In 1927 a realtor brought him out to Rainier Beach to look at five acres of logged off swamp along Renton Avenue South. His youngest son Tom recalls that the land was very brushy and hard to walk through but that after they managed to push in a little way, his dad heard water and got very excited. The five-acre piece had some changes in elevation, several springs and an all-season creek. Tom says, "He wanted it really bad..." It took all the family's resources including the kid's savings to make the down payment and the land was purchased in the name of a friend since Mr. Kubota could not legally hold land. Rainier Beach had been annexed to Seattle in 1907 but was considered to be far out in the country and Renton Avenue was only paved for one lane. The family had a caretaker live on the property and commuted out from the

International District to work on the garden.

Their first project was to drain the swamp. A rockery was placed along Renton Avenue, roads were made and ponds were dug out along the creek. The Great Depression was slow coming to the Pacific Northwest and the Kubota Gardening Company continued to prosper through 1931 but then, according to Tom Kubota, everything stopped. During the depression when "We had time but no money," Tom recalls that they worked building the Japanese Garden. The pond was dug out with wheelbarrows and with horses dragging a Fresno Scraper. The excavated soil created the hill and the stones were glacial erratics recovered from construction sites and farmer's fields.

After 1936, business began to pick up again and in 1940 the family moved to the garden to live. By this time Mr. Kubota had acquired additional land adjacent to the original five acres, more than doubling the property. Much of the area of the Garden was already planted with nursery stock for later sale to landscaping customers. He would continue to acquire property as he could afford it, having a strong feeling that "You need to have 20 acres to make something really good." It was always a financial stretch. Tom describes his dad as someone who "Just went out and did what he wanted to do, and then we all suffered."

### The Internment at Minidoka

In 1940 there were about 7,000 people of Japanese ancestry in Seattle, about two thirds were citizens, born in America. Discriminated against in housing and employment, most lived in the central city and had little contact with the rest of the city of 368,000 people. After December 7, 1941, there were few voices raised in support of the Japanese Americans. On March 21, 1942, notices were posted in Seattle directing that all persons of Japanese ancestry were to report the following week for evacuation. Mr. and Mrs. Kubota and their daughter May, their son Tak and his family, were interned in Idaho at Camp Minidoka until the fall of 1945.

Near Hunt, Minidoka was located on 33,500 acres of desert land reclaimed by the government when homesteaders abandoned it. Temperatures ranged from a minus 20 degrees in winter to 115 degrees in summer. It was an instant city of over 9,000 people uprooted from their homes, deprived of their civil rights, and never charged with any crime. Years later, in 1980, the federal Civil

Liberties Commission would declare that the internment of 110,000 people nationally was caused by "racial prejudice, wartime hysteria, and the failure of political leadership."

Mr. Kubota served as representative of Block 26 at Minidoka and busied himself with landscaping, trying to make the area more comfortable by planting trees to provide shade. He was also active in the Variety Show Club that offered regular entertainment in the camp. Before the war Mr. Kubota had been an enthusiastic actor in the local Japanese theater, playing women's roles in the old time plays. He loved to entertain and Tom recalls that, "He would stand up at a gathering and would make people laugh or cry too".

### The Return to Seattle

Tom Kubota served in the army in the Military Intelligence Unit and was given a furlough to help his family move from the camp. Minidoka was one of the last camps to close and word had reached Idaho of the rough treatment other returning internees had experienced. There was a real concern about whether it was safe to return to Seattle. Tom traveled to Seattle, talked with old customers and friends and returned to Minidoka to encourage his family to return to Seattle which they did. Many interned Japanese never returned to their home cities, rather moving away from the coast to mid-west and eastern cities. The family had renters staying in the house during the years of internment, but the garden had been untouched for four years. Grass had grown so high that the roads were unrecognizable, the carefully pruned trees had gone wild, and the ponds were full of silt and debris.

Mr. Kubota was now sixty-six years old and he faced back taxes and assessments plus the interest incurred during the internment. Tom recalls spending three weeks cutting the grass around the house with a scythe. At that time the family decided that they would concentrate upon design and garden construction rather than garden maintenance. They began extensive plantings of nursery plants that were then grown to maturity for use on their jobs. Mr. Kubota had brought seed for Japanese black and red pines from Japan before the war. During the internment the seedlings had grown from one to over six feet and they were replanted all over the garden. These trained pines were the signature plant of the Kubota Gardening Company. Their old customers called and there was high demand for their work.

Even before the war the Kubota firm had worked at Seattle University and they continued to landscape the fifty-two-acre campus during the fifties and sixties. Their expertise in moving large trees allowed them to bring a note of maturity to essentially a young campus. Although much changed due to the development of new buildings, the SU campus remains as a prime example of their public work. Another is the Japanese Garden at the Bloedel Reserve on Bainbridge Island, created in 1960.

In the decades following the war the political climate for the Japanese-Americans began to improve. In 1952 the McCarran-Walter Act allowed the Issei to become U.S. Citizens and in 1966 Washington State overturned the last Alien Land Law. The Seattle Japanese American community had traditionally been leaders within the national community. The Japanese American Citizens' League was established in 1929, and had its first national convention in Seattle in 1930. Minidoka was the only internment camp which produced a yearbook, the *Minidoka Interlude* and in the mid '60s the community sponsored the 1016-page book *Issei*, documenting the life experiences of these then very elderly people. Seattle Nisei and Sansei were leaders in the Redress Movement which led to national apologies in 1988 and payments to surviving internees.

The garden in Rainier Beach was restored by the end of the forties and the family continued to develop it as time and money allowed. Mr. Kubota's last major project was the creation of the Mountainside in 1962, the year of the Seattle World's Fair. This garden is intended to give the visitor a trip into the mountains. Mr. Kubota had saved special stones and plants for years and he built a twisting path that gains 65 feet in elevation and used over 400 ton of stone to create a series of pools and waterfalls. He was then 83 years old and continued to work with his sons creating gardens across the area. In the early '70's the Moon Viewing Platform and Moon Bridge were created. Mr. Kubota was then in his nineties, and Tom comments that his dad mostly advised on this project.

In 1972, when he was ninety-three, the Japanese Government awarded Fujitaro Kubota the Fifth Class Order of the Sacred Treasure, the highest such award then given in the Pacific Northwest. It was given in recognition of his "achievement in his adopted country, for introducing and building respect for Japanese Gardening and culture there." Mr. Kubota died in 1973 leaving a legacy of many fine private and public gardens, his own Kubota Garden and his family.

## A Public Garden

The Kubota family continued the business but by the late '70's it became apparent that sustaining the twenty-acre garden was unrealistic. Many proposals were developed to build residential housing on the property and this generated much concern among those who knew that a unique garden was likely to be lost. Mr. Kubota had an expansive nature; he loved to show people around the garden and had always made the garden available to the public. The Japanese- American community held many prefecture parties at the garden, school children in the neighborhood came for field trips and a manicured picnic lawn was kept for the neighbors to use for picnics. During Mr. Kubota's life time, there had been talks with the city about acquiring the garden as a public garden but no agreement was ever achieved. In an effort to protect the garden, in 1981 the four-and-a-half-acre core garden was declared to be a Historical Landmark of the City of Seattle.

Various proposals for residential development were rejected, however a proposal to build 268 units was given approval by Seattle's building department. Landscape designers, gardeners, neighbors, artists, Japanese-Americans, and old clients across the city encouraged the city to acquire the garden. City Councilwoman Jeanette Williams led the effort and facilitated the purchase. In 1987 the City of Seattle acquired the twenty-acre garden as a public park. In 1989 the Kubota Garden Foundation was established as a non-profit, friend's organization, to "support, enhance, and perpetuate the Kubota Garden within the spirit and vision of Fujitaro Kubota."

Tom Kubota was the primary source for this article which I prepared for a lecture series "Japanese Elements in Pacific Northwest Garden Design" held at the Seattle Asian Art Museum in the fall of 1996. Tom died in 2004 but I have retained his voice here as a happy memory of his, as always, generous and gracious support.