



The Konnichi-an garden in Kyoto, Japan

Photo: From *The Japanese Garden* by Sophie Walker

## ON TREND WABI SABI

Might you benefit from incorporating a Japanese aesthetic ideal into your work?

If 2017 seemed to be the year of *hygge*, in 2018 'wabi sabi' is the trendy term being bandied about in the headlines. Garden designer Sophie Walker, author of *The Japanese Garden*, says that despite the glib publicity, it's not easy to translate this Japanese term into English, because "there is no single or simple explanation of what wabi sabi 'is' – it isn't one 'thing'". London-based designer Adolfo Harrison MSGD agrees. "It's a bit like the other Japanese word that people struggle with: 'umami'. It falls down when people try to make a literal translation."

The reduction of wabi sabi to a kind of 'oriental shabby chic' is unhelpful, but it's more informative to look at how Andrew Juniper sums it up in his book *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence*, as "an aesthetic ideal that uses the uncompromising touch of mortality to focus the mind on the exquisite transient beauty to be found in all things impermanent".

What does that mean for garden designers, then? It involves thinking about materials in terms of how they change over time, Harrison explains. "We've always declared that gardening's a time-based medium, but by that, people are usually talking about the plants. With wabi sabi, we're talking about the materials. You start changing your materials palette, not just to suit

your clients and the narrative, but materials that record the weathering process they've been subjected to. We're not talking about perfect polished granite, but materials that change and show their imperfections, like zinc and Corten. There's an honesty and a humility in accepting we can't control what happens to these materials."

Or, as Walker puts it, "Wabi sabi teaches us not to work against the inherent nature of the garden, but to accept the garden's natural drive towards decay. The garden's beauty lies in the vulnerability and awkwardness of nature itself. It is our challenge to be at one with and accepting of the truth of impermanence and imperfection."

Harrison says wabi sabi isn't something clients are currently mentioning to him when they provide a brief, but it is still something that runs through the design process as part of the narrative for every garden he works on. "We tell clients what wabi sabi is, and how it fits with what they're aspiring to." And although wabi sabi is enmeshed into Japanese culture, once you start to grasp this aesthetic, you begin to see it everywhere, including many of the UK's finest gardens, says Harrison. "Whenever we think of great gardens, even in the UK, they are usually the older ones, where they've got that patina of age."

## INSIDER INFO

### MEMBER NEWS

Marcus Foster, Darren Hawkes, Nic Howard, Maitanne Hunt, David Loy, Ed Oddy, Jon Sims and Ruth Willmott all passed one stage in the process to becoming Registered Members in March, while Alastair Henderson passed two. Barbara Samatier passed her final stage of adjudication and is now MSGD. Congratulations to them all. To find out more about the adjudication process, go to [www.sgd.org.uk](http://www.sgd.org.uk).

### OPEN DAY

Writtle University College in Essex is holding an open day on 30 June (11am-4pm) for people to find out more about its garden design courses, including the MA in garden design. For further information or to book a place go to [writtle.ac.uk/HE-Open-Day](http://writtle.ac.uk/HE-Open-Day).

### GLASSHOUSE EVENT

Greenhouse maker Alitex is holding an open morning at its show site on the Hampshire/Sussex border on Saturday 23 June from 9am to 1pm. It's a chance to take a factory tour, check out greenhouse designs and talk to Alitex's sales designers on site. Find out more at [www.alitex.co.uk/blog/events](http://www.alitex.co.uk/blog/events).

### KITCHEN COURSE

The Lapa Company is offering three one-day outdoor kitchen design courses, on 28 June, 26 July and 30 August, covering subjects such as ventilation, utilities, materials and planning. The course costs £40 per person + VAT including lunch, and takes place in Borough Green, Kent. Book a place at [fire-magic.co.uk/outdoor-kitchen-design-course.html](http://fire-magic.co.uk/outdoor-kitchen-design-course.html)

### CHATTO SYMPOSIUM

'Ecological planting in the 21st century' is the title of the Beth Chatto Symposium at the University of Essex on 30-31 August 2018. Speakers will include James Hitchmough, Dan Pearson, Cassian Schmidt and Keith Wiley, and all attendees are invited to a private garden party at Beth Chatto's Garden on the first evening. [www.bethchattosymposium.com](http://www.bethchattosymposium.com)