

# CHINA

# 中国

Home gardeners and professionals have long been inspired by well-designed gardens that stimulate the senses. China's gardens seem to have a healthy balance of space, plants, pathways, sitting areas, views and harmony with nature. Landscape designer **Ben French** recently travelled to China to explore some of the original and classical styles of gardens that have influenced so many others over the centuries.

**W**ith China's huge population and high-rise skyline, many people are amazed at what the country offers for tourists. The family and I travelled to Shanghai and ventured to destinations within a four hours drive of this very bustling city. We started our visit, exploring the energetic hive of activity, that is, Shanghai.

The skyscrapers went as far as the eye could see, and for the most populated city in China, they did really well at greening the concrete aisles of the city, with thriving little patches of vegetation everywhere. There were bromeliads planted across overpass walkways; small shrubs following the edges of

freeways; street trees shading the busy roads; and there were even overhead plantings above bicycle racks.

From a landscaping point of view, it was incredible to see the attention to detail in every facet, particularly the intricate and time-consuming pebbling of the pathways. There were some amazing patterns and a great use of materials.

The Chinese people are warm and friendly, the food was delicious and the gardens exquisite. All up we visited over a dozen beautiful gardens in China and would highly recommend it to anyone considering making the trip; it was really rewarding and eye opening.

# Yùyuán Gardens and Bazaar Shanghai

# 豫园

Located in the middle of the animated streets of Shanghai, surrounded by City skyscrapers, this classical walled garden sits on around five acres and is a total contrast to its surroundings. You will find total seclusion in these 16<sup>th</sup> Century Yu Gardens, which were built by a very wealthy government official, Pan Yudan, in the Ming-dynasty. He made the garden especially for his parents, a tranquil place for them to enjoy their old age.

Yù in Chinese means pleasing and satisfying, it is aptly called Garden of Joy (*Yùyuán*).

It is a walled garden that divides the area into six scenic sections which makes it feel like a maze and seem much larger than it really is. The white walls in the

garden are topped by a surging dragon. There are pavilions, unique cloisters, decorative windows, streams, ornamental ponds teeming with huge golden carp, ornate bonsai, rocky mountains – all designed to create reproductions of famous natural settings on a much-reduced scale.

What I liked about this garden was that the intricate windows and doors lead your eyes into the next welcoming space. We arrived at the garden first thing in the morning before all the large crowds emerged. There are also great little markets dotted along the outer streets of the gardens, with everything from the typical and quirky souvenir, traditional Chinese medicine to some look-alike antiques.



# Humble Administrator's Garden *Suzhou*

# 拙政园



The Humble Administrator's Garden (*Zhuōzhèng yuán*) is located in Suzhou, a canal town, known as the 'Venice of China'. Like the Yu Garden of Shanghai, The Humble Administrator's Garden also features rockeries and scenes that resembled natural mountains, lakes and streams. It is considered as one of China's four most famous gardens. Apparently there hasn't been another classical garden in the country which has been honoured more than this one. It is the largest of Suzhou's gardens, located on twelve and a half acres and for many considered the most impressive.

The garden was established in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by a retired magistrate, Wang Xianchen. It was said that he planned to build a garden after he retired so that he could 'just do some gardening work like planting trees and vegetables there' – hence the name of the garden.

It has since changed hands many times and has seen many changes over the years, yet still loosely resembles its original layout.

The garden is separated into three principal parts set around a large lake: east section; central section; and west section. It has numerous pavilions and zig-zagging bridges set amongst a labyrinth of connected pools

and islands. Water is the main background feature and its natural landscape includes small forests, hills and rock formations. Lotus plants (*Nelumbo nucifera*) are featured in the water and when in flower are one of the favourite displays for visitors. The lawn is ringed by a grove of

Crepe Myrtle trees (*Lagerstroemia indica* cultivars) and other distinctive vegetation including Loquat Trees (*Eriobotrya japonica*), bamboos, magnolias and 18 species of rare camellia. This garden provides many tranquil spots to sit and read a book, or just meander aimlessly losing yourself in its beauty.



## Tiger Hill Suzhou

# 虎丘山



Tiger Hill (*Hǔ qiūshān*) is a man-made hill which is located outside the Lumen Gate in the far north west of the town of Suzhou and is the burial place of He Lu, the King of Wu and founder of Suzhou. His spirit is said to be protected by a white tiger, which appeared three days after his death and refused to leave. The main attraction is the Song-dynasty leaning pagoda called Cloud Rock Pagoda, which stands atop of Tiger Hill. It is an octagonal seven-storey pagoda which was built entirely of brick in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century. This was considered an innovation in Chinese architecture at the time.

The Pagoda started tilting some 400 years ago and leans more than 2m from the perpendicular at its highest point. The park is quite large, sitting on some three acres and has an elevation of over 36m. On the winding road back to the base, there are huge Camphor Laurels (*Cinnamomum camphora*) which line the cobbled stone road.

# West Lake Hangzhou

# 西湖

There is a famous old Chinese saying: "Above there is Heaven, below there is Suzhou and Hangzhou".

We had seen beautiful Suzhou, so thought it apt to head to Hangzhou, which is home to the stunning and tranquil West Lake (Xīhú). The lake covers eight square kilometers and there are hundreds of small boats with owners more than willing to take you across the lake. An alternative option is to hire and ride a bike around the lake and take all the sights and smells in.

The lake and its environs have all the elements of traditional Chinese gardens but on a much grander scale. Surrounded by gentle green hills, serene forests with dense foliage, giant lotus plants sprawled across the lake and the banks lined with peaceful willow trees that blow gently in the breeze, it was a relaxing way to spend the day.



West Lake's lotus plants start to bloom in early June and reach peak blossom time in late June, extending until early September. In spring, visitors are welcomed by the sweet-scented Osmanthus trees (*Osmanthus fragrans*) that have been heavily planted in parks around the lake.

## Join Us in China

Come join Editor, Paul Plant on the Great Subtropical Gardens of China tour spanning Kunming, Guangzhou, Shanghai and Suzhou, and visiting 8 stunning gardens.

**See opposite for details!**

**YARDS Garden Landscaping Design**  
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