

# Gardening

As the sun rises with the morning glow, Michael Alexanian starts his day by raking his *karesansui* Zen garden. His wife, Dianne, at another side of their Japanese garden, says "good morning" to all the plants and refreshes herself. Everyday begins this way in a corner of Japan they have built in the backyard of their East Lansing home.

The Alexanians created the Shakunage Tei and Tei-En, Japanese Cultural Pavilion and Gardens, toward the end of July, 1996, after three months of construction. Three years have passed since the creation of the garden, but the calmness and coziness of the place still hasn't changed.

"I live two lives. A normal life is in the front (of the house) and the backyard is a different country," Dianne says. In a garden of magnolias, irises, wisteria, arborvitae, pampas, azaleas, Japanese red maple and rhododendrons, a dry riverbed runs through the yard and under a bridge in front of the pavilion. Stones are paved across the garden in the way a bird spreads its wings. A *torii* gate and the pavilion calm



The Pavilion

one's soul. To step off the back porch of their house is like stepping from the U.S. to traditional Japan.

The inspiration behind the creation of the Japanese garden came from their trips to Shiga, Japan as Sister City Goodwill Exchange Delegates in 1993 and 1995.

"When we studied in Japan and returned to Michigan, we thought there was no place for the Japanese to feel comfortable or a proper place with wooden buildings or a *tatami* (or straw-mat-floor) environment for us to learn the Japanese culture with respect," Dianne says.

"We want to give back what Japan gave us, which is comfort and peace."

Although creating a Japanese garden in the U.S. wasn't easy for the Alexanians, their interests and dreams of Japan kept them going. They learned about Japanese gardens by studying and visiting many gardens in Japan, learned the Japanese architecture from floors to roofs, walls to windows, alcoves, *tokonoma*, decks, and even under-floor, and learned different measurements used



Dianne & Michael Alexanian

for them. They also researched plants for *ikebana*, or flower arranging, so that they can enjoy flowers all-year-round in the garden.

The garden was created based on yin-yang, Chinese dualistic philosophy, balancing women and men, Dianne and Michael, and their responsible parts of the garden. Dianne takes care of the garden at a side of yin, which means moon, shadow and femininity, while Michael is responsible for a side of yang, which is sun, light, masculine element, at the pavilion and the Zen garden.

"Ten years ago, we thought something is missing, which was spirit," Dianne also says. "In order to understand any art, we have to get in touch with the spirit." Since the creation of the garden, they say they keep peacefulness inside of their body and soul. Dianne has learned *ikebana*, flower arranging, and Michael has been the first American swordsman of Tamiya Ryu Iaijutsu, the Japanese art of swordsmanship, holding *godan*, the fifth black belt. Not only does the garden help in their learning the spirit of Japanese art, it also helped Dianne to get total-control over her suffering from high blood pressure. Medical science has not yet proven that a Japanese garden has a remedy for high blood pressure, but the Alexanians' garden suggests it helps to encourage one's spirit and body.

The Alexanians invite homesick Japanese students to their house. "We believe the garden helps Japanese students by coming here," Dianne says. Being in the garden and smelling the wood and the scents they remember their home and feel a part of Japan.

Their life with the Japanese garden involves cleaning their own parts of the garden and pavilion in the morning, enjoying the flowers and doing swordsmanship together at the pavilion during the day, or when they're stressed out, they just come out and refresh themselves. When fireflies glow at night, they light lanterns and enjoy the garden and the moon from inside. The corner of Japan in East Lansing is a corner of the Alexanian's life and spirit, and that of many Japanese and Americans.

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The Alexanians offer special cultural classes at the pavilion and garden throughout the year. If you are interested in one of the classes or the garden, call Michael or Dianne Alexanian at 517-332-3221. You can also go to their web page at [www.shakunage.org](http://www.shakunage.org). Story and photos submitted by: Ikari Takako. **LCL**



Shishiodoshi (above)



The Japanese Garden