

## More than just rocks: Symbolic meanings behind common Zen garden elements

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Rooted in Japanese culture, Zen gardens are rich with symbolism, often reflecting principles of Zen Buddhism and nature's harmony especially in home décor

Zen [gardens](#), with their understated elegance, have fascinated many of us and it is easy to overlook the deeper significance beneath their minimalist [designs](#) but [interior](#) designers reveal that each element holds a story tied to the timeless wisdom of Zen philosophy. Let us explore the symbolism within these calming spaces.



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In an interview with HT Lifestyle, Shailja Awasthi, Founder and Design Principle Architect at Shailja Awasthi: Sublime Spaces and Places, shared, “Rocks are the heart of any Zen Garden. They symbolise strength, stability and remind us of the enduring power of mountains. When we place rocks, we are not just building a garden, we are creating a miniature landscape that inspires a sense of grounding. Picture yourself seated near these weathered stones—don't you feel a deep connection to the earth? Gravel raked into flowing patterns, that's the Zen garden's representation of water. It embodies the ebb and flow of life – a constant change that's beautiful in its own way. The act of raking itself is active meditation; it clears the mind and helps focus on the task at hand.”

She revealed, “Sand – that's the open canvas of the Zen Garden. It's pure, simple, begging for a touch of creativity. The patterns formed in the sand mirror our own thoughts – swirling, connecting, impermanent. As we rake, a sense of peace and clarity washes over us. Plants are used sparingly but their impact is immense. Bamboo, for instance, bends but doesn't break – that's resilience. Moss is pure humility, growing low and vibrant. Then there are cherry blossoms. A powerful reminder that beauty lies in fleeting moments. Plants add that touch of the living world to the garden, a balance we all need. Bridges and pathways lead you through the garden but more importantly, they represent the journey we all walk. Each step, each turn, is a reminder to be fully present on that path. They tie together the whole garden energetically.”

She added, “A Zen Garden isn't just about aesthetics. Every rock, every grain of sand, is a purposeful choice tied into centuries-old philosophy. When you step into a Zen Garden, you're entering a space designed to bring stability and insight. Perhaps that's the most meaningful impact a space can have on our lives.”

Vijai Subramaniam, Chairman and Founder of Royaloak Furniture, opined, “In a world fraught with eustress and vagueness, it's crucial to understand the symbolic meanings behind common Zen Garden elements to enhance our products' design and resonate with people's homes on a deeper level. Zen gardens, rooted in Japanese culture, are rich with symbolism, often reflecting principles of Zen Buddhism and nature's harmony. Especially when integrating them into home décor with fountains and plants being part of it. Zen gardens are more than just landscapes; they're reflections of deeper philosophical principles, offering tranquillity and harmony. Common principles follow Rocks (Ishi), Sand (Suna), Water (Mizu), Plants (Kusa) and Bridges (Hashi). It offers a sanctuary for the soul and a path to serenity and contemplation.”

He pointed out, “As they say - ‘Better than a thousand hollow words is one action that brings peace.’ Peace can mean different things to different individuals. Understanding these symbolic meanings allows us to infuse our Interior designs with deeper significance and resonance. We can incorporate elements such as clean lines, minimalist aesthetics, Fountains, plants and natural materials to evoke the simplicity, balance, and tranquillity associated with Zen gardens. By doing so, we can offer functional and aesthetically pleasing interiors but also provide homes with pieces that enrich their living spaces.”

Bringing her expertise to the same, Geeta Arya, Founder and Principal Architect at Geeta Vaibhav Architects, elaborated upon the symbolic meanings behind common Zen garden elements -

## **1. Rocks and Stones**

- Large Rocks: Symbolize stability, strength, and endurance, resembling mountains or islands.
- Gravel or Sand: Represent fluidity, change, and the passage of time, mirroring water or the ocean.
- Arrangement: Reflect balance, harmony, and interconnectedness through their placement in patterns or clusters.

## **2. Plants**

- Moss: Embodies resilience, simplicity, and age, thriving in serene, shady areas.
- Bonsai Trees: Symbolize harmony, balance, and patience, reflecting the beauty of nature in miniature form.

## **3. Water Features**

- Fountains or Water Basins: Signify purity, clarity, and the flow of life energy, promoting relaxation and mindfulness.
- Raked Sand Patterns: Mimic the movement of water, symbolizing change and the impermanence of life.

## **4. Bridges and Paths**

- Bridges: Represent transitions, connections, and overcoming obstacles in life or the spiritual journey.
- Stone Paths: Symbolize mindfulness and contemplation, guiding one along the path of life.

## **5. Lanterns and Ornaments**

- Stone Lanterns: Symbolize enlightenment, and inner peace, and serve as focal points for meditation.
- Ornaments: Reflect cultural and spiritual themes, such as wisdom and compassion.

## **6. Sand Patterns and Zen Garden Layout**

- Raked Patterns: Symbolize order, mindfulness, and intentionality, while circular patterns signify eternity and unity.
- Asymmetry and Empty Space: Emphasise naturalness, spontaneity and the importance of negative space in creating balance and harmony.