

Japanese atmosphere at Roihuvuori's Parks

In the eastern Helsinki Roihuvuori district can be found two parks – Cherry Park and a Japanese-style garden – that exude a Japanese atmosphere; each has its own fascinating story.

The sunny slope of grass and growing trees under the Roihuvuori water tower began to become *Cherry Park* when the first 52 cherry trees were planted there on World Environment Day 2007. This year 50 trees were added.

It all began a few years ago when the City of Helsinki's Public Works Department received an initiative from Norio Tomida, a Japanese citizen living in Helsinki, regarding the founding of a park with a cherry tree theme. The essence of his idea was that Japanese people residing in Finland would donate the cherry trees – a small piece of Japan as it were – as a gesture of appreciation for being able to live in such a pleasant city as Helsinki. Inspired by Norio Tomida, a group of Japanese donors living in Finland was found.



The Public Works Department's *Hyvä kasvaa Helsingissä* ("Grows Good in Helsinki") programme seized upon the charming idea and began to search for donors who could help underwrite the park's founding and maintenance costs. Three companies were found and the search for additional corporate sponsors continues. As planned, co-operation among Helsinki's Japanese community, the corporate sponsors, and the City will result in the planting of a total of 150 cherry trees by the year 2009. Helsinki's residents, as well as visitors to the city, will be given a delightful park location where, with the Japanese, they will be able to experience the Japanese *hanami* tradition when the trees blossom in the spring.

Hanami, meaning "flower viewing", is the most important annual celebration in Japan. Because *Hanami* is timed to coincide with the blossoming of the cherry trees, its dates fluctuate yearly depending on weather conditions. On Mothers' Day 2008, the first *hanami* celebration took place in the park; Japanese associations operating in Helsinki participated in the arrangements.

With the planting of the cherry trees, the park's network of paths has been improved and its lighting replaced; years from now there may even be a water theme edging the flower beds. A slate-covered terrace at the park's upper higher section contains a plaque with the

names of donors, as well as Japanese-style benches. A path beginning from the forested upper ridge leads to another “mini Japan” – a *Japanese-style park*.



Nestled on a terrace-like slope among apartment buildings is an almost hectare-sized Oriental-style garden that has been excavated primarily by hand. The former slate quarry now features a moon gate, bamboo fences, shingle-roofed canopies, rock gardens, sand waves and a rocky brook representing the sea of life. In the spring this park's slope also blossoms with the enchantingly beautiful stand of cherry trees.

The construction of the park, the brainchild of the Public Works Department's Jukka Toivonen, began in 1990; finalising the park's appearance took eight years. A labour force financed primarily by unemployment funds gradually refined the park's composition of elegant structures. Although the underlying idea behind the building of the Japanese garden was the concept of an Oriental garden and its inherent symbolism, the intent of the Japanese-style park at Roihuvuori is to recall the genre, not mimic it compulsively.

The mystique of Japanese garden care, as well as religious overtones, were part of the process, the starting point for design was the exploitation of the existing natural elements, but in a Japanese style. Accentuating the terrain's dramatic elevation differences and the indigenous Finnish vegetation was the objective. Thus the moss-covered rock outcroppings and domestic mountain ashes became – through small cliffs and brooks – a Japanese mountain landscape.

The naturally growing handsome pines, decorative mountain ashes and junipers were supplemented with appropriate domestic species as well as Japanese plants suiting the spirit of the location. The multi-layered symbolism characteristic of Japanese gardens could only be applied to a limited extent at Roihuvuori.

According to Japanese land use principles, a primary objective when building the park was to find the most favourable areas and avoid construction in less advantageous locations that might result in damage or accidents. Following certain Oriental practices, the park's various gardens have been named for mythical creatures dominating the compass directions: **The Garden of the White Tiger, The Park Forest of the Black Turtle, The Garden of the Red Phoenix and the park of the Blue Dragon.**

The park is popular with garden enthusiasts and is an oasis for local residents, whether the preference is for quiet contemplation or a game of petanque. Everyone can find his or her own favourite nooks and crannies in the richly varied terrain.

In both parks one can right now recite Pablo Neruda's poem to one's beloved:

"I want to do with you what spring does with cherry trees."