

Saihoji's Gardens

The traditional rock gardens at Saihoji Temple in Kyoto were designed in 1339 by high-ranking priest and master gardener Muso Soseki. Now known as Kokedera ("moss temple"), the gardens at Saihoji are covered with more than 120 kinds of moss. Originally, the gardens consisted of white sand and green pine trees, and cherry blossoms in season. The moss came much later, most likely after flooding.

Saihoji's gardens are divided into lower and upper levels. The lower level features a garden centered on the spring-fed Golden Pond, while the upper level features a traditional rock garden. The gardens of Saihoji Temple have been recognized as a Historic Site and a Place of Scenic Beauty.

Golden Pond forms the center of the lower garden. It is said that worshipers can purify their mind and body by wandering through the gardens and walking around the pond. Three tea houses are located here.

The gently undulating path soon changes into a steep, zigzag path after passing through one of the covered gates. This path to the upper garden is reminiscent of the steep mountain path that monks climbed during their training for enlightenment.

The upper level features an atmosphere that is a bit more severe. In fact, the steep path and the overwhelming presence of rocks and stone structures were created to express the austere spirituality of the Rinzai sect of Zen Buddhism, which was considered revolutionary at the time. Meanwhile, Saihoji's traditional rock garden, the centerpiece of the lower garden, is the oldest in the world, and served as a model for later rock gardens, such as those at the Golden Pavilion (Kinkakuji) and the Silver Pavilion (Ginkakuji).