

# *the* TROPICAL GARDEN

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Summer's bounty in the tropics



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# Embracing the Wabi Sabi Garden

Text and photos by Kenneth Setzer



It's time we let go of the search for neatness and perfection in our gardens. Tend your garden, but also embrace imperfection, chaos, simplicity and unlikeness.

**A**n obsession with neatness and perfection has been placing a burden on our psyches, bodies, wallets and environment for decades. No more! It's time to embrace the concept of wabi sabi in our gardens.

How can wabi sabi enrich our gardening lives? From Japanese, a language that

is in many ways the mirror image of English, it is difficult to simply translate the term "wabi sabi." I've gathered it means—at least superficially—embracing the transience of being, finding beauty in the simple, seeing age, imperfection, breaks, bumps and bruises as desirable signs of a life well lived. Patina, rust, verdigris, wear and tear are all a badge of courage. These are signs of age we

sometimes try to imitate, but it's never the same as what we get from authentic ageing. More often, though, we try desperately to hide such character.

We can appreciate age and imperfection—the latter up to a point—in antiquities. Why not in gardens and landscaping? Let us cast aside the ubiquitous American lawn,

trimmed hedgerows and similar high-maintenance plantings. The lawn obsession of the past century has resulted in great sales of lawn mowers, fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides. But it's not been healthy. Fertilizers end up in our water and lead to eutrophication—hyper-fecundity caused by excessive nutrients in water, which leads to algal blooms and other sickly conditions. Pesticides and herbicides are beyond over-used in our culture,



All stages of life can be lovely to behold and contemplate.

analogous to the overuse of antibiotics in medicine. I don't want to get into that tangled and politicized problem. But, if you spot a couple blades of green growing from a crack in the pavement, pull them out by hand, or marvel at their ability to germinate in a barren, hot, sunbaked, sometimes inundated, minuscule crack of soil. This is part of wabi sabi—appreciating this moment in all its imperfection, chaos, simplicity and unlikeness.

Yellowing palm fronds provide a classic example of our reaction to signs of age. We cut them off, because, for some reason, we think palms need to meet our idea of perfection—and that does not include yellow or brown fronds. But

experts tell us to leave them. Barring disease or nutritional problems, palm fronds naturally age, and as they do, the tree translocates remaining nutrients from that ageing frond back to new, emerging fronds in the crownshaft. If you cut off a yellowing frond, you cut off this source of nutrition. Wait until it's completely brown, or falls off. Less work for you, more nutrition for the palm. It's a beautiful process.

worldview that values permanence, grandeur, symmetry, and perfection."

This doesn't mean letting things go untended. Rather, it means accepting that, as the quote goes, "the cup is already broken," so appreciate the here and now, and accept that not everything can or should be bent to our will. Nature is already perfect in its imperfection.

It may not be immediately apparent how to apply these concepts to landscapes. But, if you consider the nature of things, you'll remember everything is transient and ephemeral—absolutely nothing lasts forever. This isn't a fact to lament, but rather an excellent reason to appreciate beauty in all its forms, while it is present. Impermanence, growth and death are the essence of nature, whether in botanic gardens or wild tropics.

So don't go to extremes to create what we've been told is a "perfect" garden. Perfection is boring. Use leaf litter as mulch. Leave twigs and fallen flowers where they fall. Everyone's garden gets weeds. Grass turns brown. Nobody has a lawn that ends naturally in a perfect, razor-sharp line. Let it all just be, if only for a bit. You will be helping the environment while impressing your friends with your Zen, wabi-sabi outlook.

"Wabi" has been translated as a state of lacking, or impoverishment. But it is more of a divestment of materialism. I'm reminded of a bonsai, single and asymmetric, with great visual impact. Less is more.

"Sabi" can be considered the appreciation of that which is old, weathered, worn in, but not worn out. In "Wabi-sabi: the Japanese Art of Impermanence," Andrew Juniper offers this insight: "Wabi-sabi suggests such qualities as impermanence, humility, asymmetry, and imperfection. These underlying principles are diametrically opposed to those of their Western counterparts, whose values are rooted in the Hellenic



The leaf skeleton is as beautiful as the living leaf.