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TOP STORY

EDITOR'S PICK

Japanese Tea Garden at Napa Valley College rededicated

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At the nexus of several academic buildings and the student center at Napa Valley College, a diverse group of students, faculty and staff joined Japanese American faith leaders on Monday for a rededication of the school's decades-old Japanese Tea Garden.

"It's at the very front of our campus, and it wasn't really noticeable before," said Trinity Tyson, a Napa Valley College student.

Napa Valley College's Japanese Tea Garden was designed and constructed in 1982, with funding gifted to the college by the city of Iwanuma, Japan, as part of its Sister City relationship with the city of Napa. Dr. Charles Ray, Napa Valley College emeritus professor of mathematics, was a member of the Napa-Iwanuma Sister City committee and advocated for the garden to be established on the grounds of the college.

The Sister City program, established in 1956 during the Eisenhower administration, was an effort to foster international economic, social and cultural cooperation after World War II.

In the fall of 1972, Napa Valley College offered a course on Japanese gardening presented by renowned landscape architect Hiroshi Tanaka. The following year, the mayors of the city of Napa and the city of Iwanuma, Japan, signed their Sister City agreement.

When Dr. Ray retired in 2003, the crucial link between the college and the sister city committee, as well as the history of the garden, were lost.



Two men pray during the rededication of the Japanese Tea Garden at Napa Valley College.

Brett Marsh/Register

However, the garden received basic care under the college's facilities plan until efforts to revitalize the garden began 2024, spurred by the attention of Napa Valley College's Superintendent and President Dr. Torence Powell.

For Powell, how the Japanese Tea Garden was nurtured and taken care of mattered not only to its diverse student body but also to the reciprocal relationship with the Japanese community it honors.

“Spaces like this are a very strong visual and spiritual representation of what we as institutions of higher education have long espoused,” he said.

The Japanese Tea Garden's renovation over the past year, as part of Napa Valley College's Cultural Spaces Initiative, has included the installation of a new granite lantern, plants and a fence using bamboo harvested from the campus grounds. Napa Valley College staff and faculty across multiple departments were involved in the planting this past April.

John Hayes, a Napa Valley College alumnus and one of the principal landscape designers of the refurbished space, emphasized the importance of the garden as a place to “feel replenished.”



Rev. Rodney Yano of the Konko Church of San Francisco sits in the renovated and rededicated Japanese Tea Garden at Napa Valley College on Monday, Sep. 15.

Brett Marsh/Register

Each of the design elements of the tea garden, Hayes said, from the boulders representing sacred mountain refuges, to the manzanita tree — widely cultivated around the world — were intentionally included as part of its rehabilitation to remind students of “the cosmic forces that allow us to be our better selves.”

The restoration and rededication of the garden was made possible by gifts from Hayes, as well as Bill Imada, a California businessperson.

Throughout the rededication ceremony, the campus of Napa Valley College itself was fittingly alluded to a “tea garden,” a ceremonial place of learning and the exchange of ideas and cultures.

Rev. Dennis Fujimoto of the Enmanji Buddhist Temple in Sebastopol was the first to offer a ceremonial blessing of the refurnished space. As he faced the audience, Rev. Fujimoto explained the chant he chose recognizes the harmony “in the water we drink, the food we eat, the people we love, and the community we are a part of.”

Rev. Rodney Yano of the Konko Church of San Francisco — a denomination rooted in traditional Shinto beliefs — continued with a second blessing of the tea garden.

He presented a small white paper tree, often used doing Shinto ceremonies, which he held forth while walking the length of the tea garden, facing the space, and bowing.

“We are only temporarily existing on this land,” said Rev. Yano, during his blessing, “but we are the caretakers.”

Sara Mahmoudi, an Iranian student who is studying at the cooking school at Napa Valley College, was attending Monday's rededication ceremony. Although she was unaware of the history of the tea garden and the relationship that helped establish it, Mahmoudi said she appreciated its significance for someone like herself who is part of a broad international student body.

"It's very good that many people all around the world can have a place to be and to share their thoughts and their experiences," she said.

Rev. Yano also emphasized the importance of celebrating diversity in the Napa Valley College community and beyond.

Rev. Yano sees poignant parallels in the nurturing of diversity and the refurbishment of the tea garden itself, which came to fruition with the efforts of people of diverse cultural backgrounds and skillsets at a time of intensifying political and social division in the U.S.

"To renovate it, to renew it, to have a rededication, it brings back all the wishes that were first intended when they built this garden, and I felt that connection," he said.

Napa Valley College student Tyson, who had worked with the college's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee and its Cultural Spaces Initiative, shared Rev. Yano's sentiment. "We say we want to understand other cultures, invite people in so they feel connected, but what are we doing to do that?" she said. "One of those things is upholding our principles by caring about the spaces."

At the conclusion of the rededication, Rev. Fujimoto lit incense at the entrance to the tea garden and offered those in the audience the chance to walk through the space in ceremony before returning to the day's academic life.

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John Hayes, one of the principal designers for the refurbished Japanese Tea Garden at Napa Valley College, prays at its rededication ceremony.

Brett Marsh/Register

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