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Home & Garden

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LANDSCAPING

Teahouse for two



Photos by Chad Ziemendorf / The Chronicle

Jim and Bonnie Bell have spent the past eight years remodeling their Berkeley Arts and Crafts abode into a Japanese standout.

Berkeley couple transform home into a Japanese sanctuary, honoring cultural details

By Anh-Minh Le
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

The home of Bonnie and Jim Bell was once your typical Berkeley Arts and Crafts abode. But over the past eight years, the couple has introduced a Japanese sensibility to the architecture and landscaping of the house — transforming it into a beautiful standout in their Chabot Canyon neighborhood.

“Both of us as children enjoyed the Japanese Tea Garden in Golden Gate Park,” explained Bonnie. “It made a big impression on us — the aesthetic, the hospitality.” As adults, their interest in the culture was furthered as they spent time traveling in Japan.

Approaching the Bells’ residence from the sidewalk, the Eastern influences are apparent. A slate-and-redwood staircase leads to front doors with rice-paper window panes; the garage door was given the same treatment. A stunning waterfall cascades into a pond that’s spanned by a slate bridge.

A large *torii* — a Japanese gate often found at the entrance to shrines — denotes passage into a soothing sanctuary of a gar-



The Bells’ handmade Japanese scroll, which was purchased in Okinawa, depicts a mountain scene with pine trees, fog, a stream, a bridge and family compound. The teahouse also features electric radiant heating beneath the straw tatami mat floor.

Teahouse continues on M6

THE DIRT

By Joe Eaton and Ron Sullivan

How to coax an orchid to rebloom

Orchids can be intimidating. People fall for a beautiful specimen at a show or a nursery, bring it home, and watch it die. Or, as Tom Perlite, owner of Golden Gate Orchids puts it, it may linger — not blooming, not dying. “They may linger for years,” Perlite said.

One way to keep your orchids happier is to make sure they’re properly repotted. Perlite recently walked us through the process, pointing out common mistakes.

“People tend to use the wrong size potting medium,” he said. Most orchids are potted in fir bark, the alternative

“Repotting while the orchid is blooming is the worst thing you can do.”

Tom Perlite, owner of Golden Gate Orchids



Angelic Nguyen/Orchid Design

Brassolaeliocattleya ‘Memoria Helen Brown’

being sphagnum moss. “They use the wrong grade of bark, typically too big for orchid varieties that prefer a finer grade. As a rule of thumb, the finer the roots, the finer the bark.” Cattleya and phalaenopsis orchids prefer coarser bark; miltonias, oncidiums and odontoglossums require finer. A miltonia planted in coarse bark will dry out too quickly and develop wrinkled leaves, which Perlite likened to a squeezed accordion.

What kind of pot is best? “Commercially, most orchids are grown in plastic pots because they require less water than clay pots,” Perlite said. “If a person likes to water, I recommend clay pots. If they’re not so good about watering, I recommend plastic.” Those ceramic orchid pots with holes in the side are a bad choice: “Unless you have a greenhouse, they dry out too fast. You can’t provide adequate water.” The size of the pot is important: “Look at the healthy roots. A big plant with few roots needs a smaller container. Choose pots that will accommodate the roots rather than the top. It’s better to underpot than to overpot.”

The timing of the dirt continues on M6

FROM THE COVER

Berkeley couple's teahouse for two

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den, complete with a teahouse. Standing in the midst of it, visitors may feel as if they've been transported 5,000 miles away.

In Japan, the garden has served as a place of contemplation and enjoyment of nature for centuries. And the Bells' interpretation is no different.

"Our lives are extremely committed, busy and full of activities," said Jim, who, along with his wife, founded Bell Investment Advisors Inc. 20 years ago. Their office handles investment management, financial planning, and career and life coaching.

"The home revitalizes and energizes us. It's different from what we do in the outside world, and the teahouse has come to represent a retreat to us."

When the Bells purchased their home, it included a koi pond, waterfall and deck. "When we first walked into the house, after a very long search, it was love at first sight," recalled Bonnie. "We had always dreamed of creating a Japanese garden, but when we walked into the backyard, there it was already!"

While the pair appreciated elements of the outdoor space, they also recognized that it could be improved upon. So they enlisted landscape gardener Danna Pierce to bring in plantings such as a miniature weeping cherry tree, three varieties of maples, azaleas and white wisteria.

Almost immediately, Jim noted that the existing Zen rock garden would better serve as the site of a teahouse. "The teahouse idea began to work its way into our minds and hearts," said his wife, "and we began to realize we could and would make it happen. It became a passion."

Although a teahouse was new to their repertoire, the Oakland firm of Komorous-Towey Architects was assigned the task of designing the 9-by-9-foot building. "The project was a labor of love for everyone concerned," said Bonnie, who added that the contractor, Bob Rugo, considers the dwelling one of the highlights of his 30-year career. (He is also responsible for work done to the home's interior and exterior.)

The teahouse is constructed of Canadian red cedar framing and white birch interior panels. For the roof, gray glazed interlocking tiles were imported from Japan. The ceiling is lined with bamboo blinds. Beneath the straw tatami mat floor (and a layer of travertine tiles) is a modern convenience:



Photos by Chad Ziemendorf / The Chronicle

The teahouse, designed by Komorous-Towey Architects, is made of Canadian red cedar framing and white birch interior panels.



No detail was overlooked, such as this fisherman figurine near the running water that leads into the koi pond.



The teahouse is also functional, with a futon, antique Japanese temple table, meditation pillows and rice-paper lanterns.

electric radiant heat that allows the homeowners to utilize the teahouse year round.

Shoji screens slide back to open the house on two sides and reveal views of the garden. Traditionally, the lattice screens are made with rice paper. The Bells opted for translucent fiberglass that mimics the look but offers greater durability.

It is customary for a teahouse to feature a *tokonoma*, or display alcove, where a scroll bearing a painting or spiritual message in calligraphy is hung. The Bells' handmade Japanese scroll, which was purchased in Okinawa, depicts

a mountain scene with pine trees, fog, a stream, a bridge and family compound. For the sake of functionality, their teahouse is also outfitted with a futon, antique Japanese temple table to rest teapots and teacups on, meditation pillows, rice-paper lanterns for reading and an altar table.

Whether it's just the two of them or they're hosting friends and family, the garden is always put to good use. The Bells have hosted social events of all sorts in the space, including their daughter's engagement party and fundraisers for local organizations.

"The teahouse is a joy to us

all day, every day," said Bonnie, "whether we're sitting in it, reading in it, praying in it, listening to music in it, or simply sitting in it looking at the garden, listening to the waterfall, observing the birds, dragonflies and butterflies, or enjoying the peaceful movement of the koi."

Their 3-year-old granddaughter may not grasp the history and significance of the Japanese teahouse, but the toddler loves it as well. "She thinks of it as her playhouse."

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Design

Landscaping: Danna Pierce, A Growing Place. (510) 569-0227

Stonework: Josh Kemp, Headwaters Hardscape. headwatershardscape.com. (510) 717-4274.

Architecture: Klara Komorous-Towey and Thomas J. Towey, Komorous-Towey Architects. ktarch.com. (510) 446-2244.

Construction: Bob Rugo, Seneca Builders. (510) 847-4095.

Pond and water features: Jim Boyle. (925) 683-5778.

Shoji screens: Hana Shoji and Interiors. hanashoji.com. (510) 842-1041.

Expert's secrets for bloom-again orchids

Dirt from page M1

operation is critical. "Repotting while the orchid is blooming is the worst thing you can do," he warned. "In most cases, the ideal time to repot is when they're growing, not when they're blooming." This would be at least a month after the bloom ends, when new leaf growth becomes visible. That's a sign that the orchid is also developing new roots. When the new growth is 1 to 3 inches tall, the plant is ready to be moved. "Most orchids make roots only a couple of times a year," Perlite continued. "If you do it too late, there won't be enough time for the plant to get established in order to bloom well." Because that takes long days, winter is a bad time to repot. His cutoff date for repotting cymbidiums is July 4.

An orchid's roots may need to be cleaned up and trimmed. Healthy roots are firm to the touch, with a white outer coating. Dead roots are mushy, and the outer coating comes off when

squeezed. Once those are eliminated, the healthy roots must be trimmed to the depth of the new pot. "You don't want to wrap them around the bottom of the pot," said Perlite. "It's like planting a bare-root rose: you want the roots spread out and open."

Bark or moss? Perlite uses both. Moss is more expensive and decomposes faster, but *masdevallias* and some other orchid varieties prefer it. Watering habits come into play here: "You can touch the moss and know if the plant is dry. Bark will be dry at the top, so you need to check the weight of the pot to determine if it needs watering." The potting medium should be soaked first; dry bark or moss will pull water away from the roots. Commercial fir bark should also be soaked to get rid of unwanted debris. "Let the bark settle between the roots and fill up the container. Then pack it firmly so the plant is secure, not wobbly."

After repotting, Perlite recommends sticking to your normal feeding regimen: Fer-



Courtesy of Tom Perlite

tilize every two weeks during the growing season, once a month in winter. "If you don't fertilize for the first two months after you repot, it's just confusing to the plant." A temporary cutback on water will encourage root growth. He keeps repotted orchids out of strong sunlight to avoid dehydration.

How often to repot depends on the kind of orchid you have. Cymbidiums will need repotting every two to three

years. Slipper orchids like *paphiopedilums* can be repotted every year. For most other varieties, a two-year interval is good.

As for those lingering orchids: "If it hasn't bloomed for a while, that's another indication it needs repotting," Perlite said. "Take it out of the pot and look at the roots. The plants will tell you what's going on."

For more orchid advice, check out the lectures and demonstra-

Trimming the roots to the depth of the pot is essential to the healthy growth of an orchid. Tom Perlite of Golden Gate Orchids says don't wrap the roots around the bottom of the pot while repotting, "you want the roots spread out and open."

tions at the San Francisco Orchid Society's Orchids in the Park Sale and Exhibition next Saturday and Sunday, at the County Fair Building in Golden Gate Park; see www.orchid-sanfrancisco.org/orchidsinthepark.html.

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