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The Kubota Legacy: The Life of Fujitarō Kubota and the Legacy of his Gardens in Seattle and on the Seattle University Campus

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Fujitaro Kubota on a ladder working on a tree in the garden, 1962. Courtesy of Kubota Garden Foundation, Densho.

Life of Fujitarō Kubota

Fujitarō Kubota, the man who transformed Seattle’s landscape in the 20th century, emigrated from Shikoku, Japan to the United States in 1907. His first job in the United States was as a laborer in Washington lumber mills until he could afford to bring his wife over from Hawaii. After the lumber mills, Fujitarō worked at a hotel, and then as a property manager in Seattle’s International District. He had managed to purchase several apartment buildings despite discriminatory prohibitions that barred Asian-Americans from land ownership, but unfortunately lost the buildings in a recession.

For a period of time, Fujitarō helped his friends who had a garden business by performing tasks like mowing lawns and

pruning. Although he didn’t have any formal training, Fujitarō decided to become a professional gardener, and established the Kubota Gardening Company in 1923. In 1927, he used all of his savings to buy five acres of swampland in Rainier Beach to clear and use as a nursery and garden. He moved to the property in 1940, and increased the garden size to twenty acres.

Fujitarō believed in working with nature rather than against it, and used native Pacific Northwest plants to create traditional Japanese gardens. Guided by the Buddhist elements of water and rocks and the Shinto focus on spirits, Kubota understood his garden as a place where giant trees and stones had souls and stood as gods. His vision was to create an outdoor

space where the community could visit to find peace from the bustle of city life. He designed his garden with the intent for it to be a re-energizing experience with constantly shifting realities and visions. There are wide open spaces, ups and downs, and twists and turns. In addition to being his home, garden, and nursery, the Kubota Garden served as a cultural center for the Japanese community in Seattle. Because of the American automobile craze of the 1950's, Fujitarō turned his garden into the first ever “drive-through garden.”

During World War II, the Kubota Garden was abandoned for four years as Fujitarō Kubota and his family were imprisoned at Camp Minidoka internment camp in Idaho. Even interned in this desolate part of Southeast Idaho, Kubota never lost his vision and supervised the building of a community park at Minidoka, which included a Japanese rock garden. This is now part of the Minidoka National Historic Site, and belongs to the National Park Service. After the war, in 1945, Fujitarō and

his sons Tak and Tom Kubota returned to Seattle despite rampant anti-Asian racism, their overgrown garden, and silt-filled ponds. Together, they rebuilt the garden and landscaping business. The Japanese government awarded Kubota the Fifth Class Order of the Sacred Treasure in 1972 “for his achievements in his adopted country, [and] for introducing and building respect for Japanese gardening in this area.” Kubota maintained the twenty acre garden until his death in 1973 at age 94.

“Kubota’s work was passed down to us not through written record, or even orally, but by photographs and his traditions by example.”

In 1981, the Seattle Landmarks Preservation Board declared the core 4.5 acres of the Kubota Garden to be a historical landmark of the City of Seattle. In 1987, the City of Seattle bought the garden from the Kubota family, and it is now maintained by the Department of Parks and Recreation as well as volunteers from the Kubota Garden Foundation. With over 100,000 annual visitors, the Kubota Garden is currently open to the public and free to visit in Rainier Beach.

There are very few written records of Fujitarō’s life and work. He rarely drew drafts for his gardens, but would ponder at the landscape and decide where plants and stones went based on an inner vision. He was also a quiet man who spoke limited English. In my interview with Ernie Dornfeld, the historian at the Kubota Foundation, Ernie said that “a lot of Kubota’s work was passed down to us not through written record, or even orally, but by photographs and his traditions by example.”



Kubota and his family, probably in Japan, 1920.
Courtesy of Kubota Garden Foundation, Densho.



Fujitarō Kubota and George Yano in front of truck, 1950.
Courtesy of Kubota Garden Foundation, Densho.

Kubota Family Landscaping: Then and Now

Kubota landscaping mainly operated in Kitsap, Pierce, and King County. It is still unknown just how many projects Fujitarō Kubota completed in Seattle and these surrounding areas. Ernie Dornfeld has been working to compile a comprehensive account of Fujitaro Kubota’s work. Amazingly, Ernie says that he is “discovering new work every week...little tidbits here and there.”

However, Kubota Landscaping didn’t cease to exist after Fujitarō’s death. The landscaping business was continued by Tom and Allen (Al) Kubota, Fujitarō’s youngest son along with his grandson,

and is still operating within Seattle today. It remains a small but busy company, led by Al Kubota, with about four employees. Following in the footsteps of his grandfather Fujitarō, Al doesn’t write down his plans or designs for the garden but works from an inner vision.



Bridge in a garden with a Kubota Gardening Company sign, 1926. Courtesy of Kubota Garden Foundation, Densho.



Front yard of home from recent project. Gallery photo from Kubota Gardens Landscaping official website.



Heart Bridge in the Kubota Garden, with statues Fujitaro Kubota purchased and shipped from Japan, 1965. Courtesy of Kubota Garden Foundation, Densho.



Father Raymond Nichols and Fujitaro Kubota, 1950. Photograph courtesy of Kubota Garden Foundation, Densho.

Seattle University

Fujitarō Kubota began working at Seattle University in 1946, and continued his work on campus throughout the 1950's and 60's. Around twenty to twenty-five sections of gardens on campus are from Fujitarō Kubota.

“With Fr. Nichols’ support and collaboration, Kubota designed and installed landscapes that would unify the grounds, knitting together the varied architectural styles of this newly emerging campus. Many of the large pines that grace the campus today are grown from seed that Kubota brought in his pockets from Japan. He also brought in large trees that he salvaged from construction sites throughout the region. The distinctive Granite and Basalt stones that presently anchor the gardens on campus were selected and brought from the Cascade Mountains by Kubota. He worked with his sons Tommy and Tak and later with his grandson, Al.

Together they created a family legacy on the Seattle University campus that we walk and breathe amongst today.” -Janice Murphy, Commons Magazine June 2013.

One way to try to identify if a garden on campus was designed by Fujitarō Kubota is to look for his calling cards. A few of his commonly used items include boulders, pine trees, Hollywood juniper, crimsons, and weeping trees such as weeping beech and weeping sequoia.

In my interview with Ernie Dornfeld, Ernie spoke about how with time, the character of the garden changes. This character change is quite evident on the Seattle University campus and can be seen in the following photographs with one of the Black pine trees that Fujitarō Kubota planted outside of Xavier Hall.



Fujitaro Kubota's garden
outside of Xaveir Hall.
Photograph by Sean
Malone, 1966.



Kubota's garden outside
of Xaveir Hall. Photograph
by Amelia Delgado, 2021.



Fujitaro Kubota trimming pine at Seattle University.
Photograph by Sean Malone, 1965.



Allen Kubota in front of a Japanese maple he planted in the Japanese Remembrance Garden. Photograph by Amelia Delgado, 2021.

Japanese Remembrance Garden

In partnership with Seattle's Japanese American Community, Seattle University built The Japanese Remembrance Garden. The garden is located on Seattle University's campus outside of the entrance to the Hunthausen building, and was designed by Allen Kubota. Dedicated in 2006, the garden was made to remember the Japanese Americans that lived on the south side of campus and surrounding areas who were displaced and incarcerated at internment camps during World War II. "Large rocks and plantings represent the experience of breaking apart and coming together again" -SU Grounds and Landscaping website.

One of the highlights of the Japanese Remembrance Garden is the weeping Red

Laceleaf maple. This centerpiece was gifted to the campus by an alumni who was a client of Al Kubota's. She had wanted her maple trimmed by Kubota Landscaping, but instead donated it to the University after Al offered to replace it with a smaller one. Another similar instance of this occurred with the large rhododendron in the garden, which was originally part of the Kingdome property before Al took it home post-removal.

The stones in this garden were carefully selected from several different locations including Canada, Montannah, and Spokane. Putting careful intention into the garden, Al himself even drove to Canada to find one of the stones.



The moving the first Green Leaf Japanese maple tree to the new Kubota Legacy Garden, 2021. Photograph by S.S. landscape worker; edited by Amelia Delgado.

The Making of the Kubota Legacy Garden

“Over the years, Kubota-designed spaces were developed in eight locations across campus, including many venerable trees with historical significance linked to Fujitarō and the Kubota family.” -Dean Forbes, Seattle U News Room.

However, as the campus goes through changes where new buildings are added and old buildings are replaced, Seattle University has to determine what happens to the surrounding gardens. The most recent instance of this is the replacement of the University Services Building with the Jim and Janet Sinegal Center for Science and Innovation. In order to preserve the

garden that Fujitarō designed outside of the University Services building, Seattle University decided to salvage several trees and boulders. With these salvaged pieces, they created a new garden outside of the Center for Science and Innovation.

According to Shannon Britton, the Grounds and Landscaping manager at Seattle University, it was a necessity to preserve these trees not only to remember Fujitaro Kubota and his legacy, but also for the wildlife habitat that lived in the garden.

Still, Shannon said that “you don’t see this kind of dedication that has been put into



The Kubota Garden at the previous building.
Photograph by Emily LaRouche.

the Kubota Legacy Garden at a lot of other places. It's significant that the University had this level of commitment to funding and following through with the project." The project started back in 2017, and is just now finishing up in the fall of 2021. In order

to further honor the Kubota family and their gardening expertise, the Mithun Landscaping architects who worked on the garden consulted with Al Kubota on the design. The salvaged Kubota material is focused and contained on the northwest

side of the new Legacy Garden, while the south side is influenced by Kubota's style.



The new Kubota Legacy Garden, 2021. Photograph by Yosef Kalinko.



The Kubota Garden trees and stones in their holding place on the Union Green, 2019. Photograph by Shannon Britton.

Transplant and Preservation

The transplant and preservation process for trees of this age is no easy process. Most new gardens use young trees from nurseries, allowing for easy replanting.

Early on in the replanting process, it was decided that Fujitarō’s collection needed to stay together. There was extensive documentation and mapping of the original garden to ensure that each boulder remained with its respective tree and maintained its same orientation, just as Kubota had planned the space over sixty years ago.

In December of 2019, the procedure of salvaging and transplanting the trees began. Unfortunately, many trees were planted too close to the building, rendering it impossible to get a good root bulb. Four Kubota trees were saved, along with two

other trees and several boulders. These trees and stones were transferred to a temporary holding place on the Union Green while construction on the new science building took place.

In order to care for the trees, “drip irrigation is provided...to ensure that the trees are getting the right amount of water. To help prevent the trees from establishing permanent roots to their temporary home, the trees have been balled and burlapped—a process which contains their roots with burlap.” -Caylah Lunning, *The Spectator*.

Placing the trees and stones into their new home outside of the Center for Science and Innovation also proved logistically difficult, as workers could only pick up and place a tree one time in order to ensure the tree’s safety.



The digging of a root bulb from the Kubota Garden at the previous University Services building. Photograph by Emily LaRouche.



Trees ready to be transplanted from the Kubota Garden at the previous University Services building to the Union Green. Photograph by Emily LaRouche.

The moving of a mossy boulder from its holding place on the Union Green to the new Kubota Legacy Garden, 2021. Photograph by Amelia Delgado.



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