

# RESTORATION THROUGH INNOVATION

## Oregon's First Japanese-Style Healing Garden Inside Prison Walls



**“If what we were doing in the past was working, we wouldn’t be building more prisons. We have really seen a change over the last 12-18 months in the culture of our population - of positivity, hope, dreams.”**

**- Brandon Kelly, OSP Superintendent ( [KATU](#) )**

A state penitentiary is not the first place one might expect to find inspiration and innovation. But that is exactly what a small group of inmates and Department of Corrections leaders at the maximum security Oregon State Penitentiary (OSP) have dared to do: follow their inspiration and innovate. With hope and a vision, they reached out to us.

For nearly fifty years, throughout the United States and abroad, founder and principal designer Hoichi Kurisu of [Kurisu LLC](#) has created unique Japanese gardens, compelled by the conviction that *nature heals*.

In today’s technology obsessed world, Kurisu believes that more than ever, human connection with natural places is essential to our mental and physical equilibrium as individuals, communities, and to society as a whole. Based in the ancient principles of Japanese garden design, Kurisu landscapes are renowned as places for personal reflection, inspiration and healing.

While Kurisu gardens have a history impacting the way in which healthcare is delivered in facilities such as hospitals and substance abuse recovery centers for youth, and have even played a critical role in the revitalization of an entire town, now we are partnering with the [Asian Pacific Family Club](#) (APF) at OSP to design and build the first *Japanese-style* healing garden in [an Oregon maximum security prison](#).

In the four years since its inception, the project has galvanized support from Kurisu, OSP’s staff and administration, fellow inmates and community members outside the walls to bring the vision to life.

Incarcerated APF member and Project Coordinator, Johnny Cofer explains:

***“When I began this work ... I can honestly say I had my own doubts and fears that this could never happen in a place like this. I’ve learned so much about myself, other people, and about humanity. Life teaches us that anything is possible if you refuse to accept the expectations of others, or limits we put on ourselves. I recognize this work as a gift of meaningful purpose.”***

This is a story of hope from the least likely to have it, and of a profound desire for restoration. It is about broadening our perspective on rehabilitation and the power of the human spirit to transform.

And ultimately, this healing garden project is a story about humanity that challenges us to consider what kind of society we wish to cultivate.



**Through our work, Kurisu wishes to support ideas that, in the bigger picture of making our communities safe, healthy and resilient, address systems as a whole.**

The United States currently houses the largest prison population in the world - about 2.3 million prisoners. We also have one of the highest recidivism rates, with nearly 80% of inmates being rearrested within five years of release. While the thought may be to lock criminals up and throw away the key, the truth is that at least 95% of incarcerated individuals will be released back into our communities.

Leading by example, the recidivism rate in Oregon is much lower than the national average, at 30%. The Oregon Department of Corrections and OSP administration have been integral partners in moving this progressive garden project forward.

The healing garden at OSP has the potential for long-term impact on how justice is defined and rehabilitation achieved. As Japanese gardens have done for thousands of years, this garden will offer unique opportunities for self-realization, tranquility, and peace. For inmates experiencing depression, anger, stress, and total disconnection from natural elements, recovering a sense of awe and appreciation for nature's beauty can inspire transformation at the deepest levels.

***"This project has given us (the project team) a greater purpose for an incredible cause, to everyday see the transformation of our behavior and even our way of thinking; and for myself, finding the compassion to care about my community has given me a sense of healing and an acceptance for who I am."***

*- Toshio Takanobu, APF Club President*

Every element in a Japanese garden - from the shape of a waterfall to the careful placement of stepping stones - is specifically designed to cultivate awareness, humility and quiet contemplation. Symbolism and metaphor in the garden offer powerful tools to help inmates reconcile their own lives and relationship to society. For those who face spending the rest of their lives in prison, the garden offers meaningful connection to nature's cycles of change and regeneration, a sense of purpose, and supports mental wellbeing.

***"To me, this [garden] will be the first place where it's all-inclusive, where everyone can go there, of any culture, of any power structure, staff, inmates. We can all go there and feel some sense of safety, some sense of peace. In this type of place, that's almost unheard of."***

*- Johnny Cofer, APF Project Coordinator*

Signifying a fundamental change in prison management, culture, and the ways rehabilitation can occur, the healing garden at OSP may serve a unique social purpose.

Kurisu's vision for the Japanese garden at OSP is a restorative space that, by providing opportunity for physical, psychological, and spiritual nourishment, promotes resilience and transformation in individuals and communities both inside and outside the walls.

**For more information, please contact:**



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