

## MEADOWLARK BOTANICAL GARDEN'S KOREAN BELL PAVILION



The first Korean immigrants arrived in America one hundred years ago, and the growth of Korean communities continued in the following decades. Today, dynamic Korean communities are found in many parts of the United States with concentrations in California, New York, New Jersey and Virginia. During this history, a uniquely close relationship between the United States and South Korea has developed through cultural exchange, a devastating war (the largest United Nations mandate ever), technological flow and academic exchange. American botanists have explored the diverse mountainous forests of Korea and have discovered intriguing taxonomic and floristic similarities to North American species. The ancient relationship between the flora of Korea and that of North America revealed an additional bond between people, landscapes and gardens. The Korean flora endowed botanical gardens with a supremely aesthetic palate of temperate plants to cultivate and display. In doing so, the world also discovered a rich culture with millennia-old traditions of celebrating and conserving nature.

## The Vision

In 2006, a small group from the Korean American Cultural Committee (KACC) visited Meadowlark in search of a potential site for a bell garden. Among this group was Jung Hwa Elmejjad-Yi, President of the Korean American Cultural Committee, and Y. David Chung, a University of Michigan Art Professor. Both have longtime roots in Northern Virginia. That initial visit sowed an incipient seed for a Korean American endeavor of combining a cultural icon with a horticultural icon. Fruitful, in-depth conversations ensued. Walks in the garden spawned design concepts and collection ideas. The aesthetic and emotive setting of Meadowlark forged a cooperative vision among the planners. Meadowlark's parent agency, the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority (NVRPA) also played a key role. It was in NVRPA that KACC found a truly unique, largely self-funded agency with visionary new leadership, poised to consider inventive ideas and partnerships. After nearly a year of research, meetings and much fine Korean cuisine, an MOU was signed. Shortly afterward, the NVRPA Executive Director and Board Chairwomen visited several sites in Korea as the guests of Jung Hwa and Professor Chung. The Korean Embassy and Washington D.C. lent diplomatic support and continue to do so. Scott Scarfone, Principal of the Oasis Design Group, further enhanced the process by creating a new Master Plan with Meadowlark staff. For NVRPA and KACC, the timing was simply perfect.

## The Historical Aesthetic Embodied

Traditional Korean gardens are influenced by several different themes, including yin-yang, the Five Elements, feng shui and other meditative mediums. Collectively, these beliefs have taught Koreans as a culture to revere nature and celebrate its qualitative effects on the human condition. Korean bell pavilions have been built for hundreds of years as focal points for gatherings that celebrate the natural world, friendship and community (Woo-Kyung, 2007). According to an old Korean saying: Bells instill a righteous spirit in those who hear its ring, and gives rise to hope, a sense of cherishing life, alarm against disaster and sense of unity that brings people together, in order to bring prosperity, happiness, friendship, freedom, and peace for all people.

The concept for a bell garden at Meadowlark is unique as it places a traditional bell pavilion in a garden with associated cultural icons. The overall design is influenced by ten traditional symbols of longevity, called Ship-Jang Saeng, which are intricately carved on the bell and decorate the masonry walls. Hanging inside the pavilion is the

stunning three ton bronze bell, modeled after the bell of King Seongdeok of the Silla Dynasty (57 BCE - 935 AD). Dedicated the “Bell of Peace and Harmony”, the Meadowlark bell is globally unique in combining images of native plants and animals from both Korea and Virginia. It serves as a cultural landmark for Korean Americans while inviting all visitors to enjoy the garden as a symbol of peace and prosperity between the two countries.

The surrounding garden further illustrates the nature-focused legacy of Korean history and culture with displays featuring the Korean alphabet, a sculpted turtle fountain and adjacent pond. A separate viewing area with traditional decorative walls and courtyard displays subtly colored masonry murals unique to Korea. Also on the site are ancestral totem poles used to greet visitors in ancient times. Near the entrance gate, carved volcanic stone statues from Jeju-do Island stand sentry-like, inviting further exploration.



The design and landscape around the bell pavilion are highly naturalized and asymmetric, having smooth lines and using the natural contours of the land to embrace the site’s intimacy in a nuanced spatial cooperative. Traditional Korean gardens are arboreal in character with trees as a focal point among shrubs

and perennials. Water is, of course, a central focus, often in the form of a winding stream. The Korean garden aesthetic is closely allied to forests, rivers and mountains, giving them a subtle naturalistic appearance, rather than a look governed by human contact as found in Japanese or Chinese gardens. This natural aesthetic is ideally suited to Meadowlark’s rolling Piedmont setting.

#### Embracing Aesthetics, Conservation and Sustainability in Collection Development

Many fine Korean plant collections are found in North American gardens. The Los Angeles County Arboretum and Botanical Garden is considering a purposed Korean garden, and the VanDusen Botanical Garden in Vancouver has an exquisite Korean



pavilion finished in the dan cheong style, featuring intricately stained colors. The Meadowlark pavilion that houses the bell is entirely built of natural wood-tones, making it the only structure of its type in a US public garden. American University (AU) is creating a Korean garden on its beautiful urban campus in Northwest Washington D.C., and Meadowlark and AU are sharing resources and plant material collected in Korea.

The bell garden at Meadowlark will include taxa native to Northeast Asia and be established as a conservation collection. Consistent with Meadowlark's three existing conservation collections, species material will take precedent over selections or hybrids. Accessioned plants will include many "trademark" Korean natives well known to temperate zone gardens. No threatened or endangered species will be used as a matter



of promoting conservation in the wild and garden collections in Korea. Korea has a system of botanical gardens and arboreta surpassing most of those in similar-sized European countries and US states and is particularly well-suited to conserving its native plant diversity. Overall, the collection will be managed with various criteria detailed in the International Agenda for Botanic Gardens in Conservation (IA) and the Global Strategy of Plant Conservation.

The coalescence of funding, diplomatic overture, international support and master planning at Meadowlark has created an exceptional opportunity. As we move forward developing the plant collection around the bell pavilion, cultural and horticultural icons will merge and bestow an extraordinary gift upon the people of Northern Virginia and the greater Washington D.C. region. It's a remarkable opportunity that illustrates the rare convergence of cultural exchange, botanical heritage and horticultural pursuit. The first Korean immigrants to the Americas would surely beam with pride at the notable accomplishments of their ancestors in promoting peace and harmony between two distant countries so intimately bonded by culture and nature.

From the BGT Team

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