The Botanical Gardens of Sawtelle
As the story goes with many neighborhoods in Los Angeles, Sawtelle is being developed. But the high-rises and multifamily apartments that have replaced the homes and long-standing businesses aren’t necessarily new developments in the neighborhood. What goes on today in Sawtelle is a trend that goes back to before Sawtelle was Sawtelle, going as far as the Tongva people that first began to draw from the Kuruvungna Springs that still flow under University High School. The urban layers build one on top of the other.

This guide takes you through the neighborhood on a tour. Some of the places of this tour are no longer there, and there’s no guarantee that any of the places that have been there will still continue to be there by the time you start. However, there are still ways to see the layers of Sawtelle’s past in its present.

The Botanical Gardens of Sawtelle isn’t necessarily one place. It is the nurseries that once sold wholesale to the Japanese gardeners who worked throughout Los Angeles, the Craftsman bungalows that created the backdrop for carefully constructed front yard gardens, and places like Stoner Park and the former Ketchie’s Stand on La Grange and Sawtelle that created a community between the Japanese and the Chicanos that called Sawtelle home.

Many of the front lawns you will see are crafted as Japanese gardens, with pines, stones, and lanterns. Of course, the lawns include the motifs of Southern California: brightly colored flowers and tall palms. The care, consideration, and labor connect the gardener to a home and culture in the face of an immigrant experience.

The Botanical Gardens of Sawtelle is also the historical context in which these places exist: a history of racial discrimination denied the Japanese immigrants homes in other neighborhoods, gave them limited opportunities for work, and illegally incarcerated them in concentration camps for the duration of World War II after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

When you’re walking in the neighborhood, watch out for traffic. Respect the neighbors. Look alive. Be alert. You want to be sure you can even hear the fronds of the tall palms clapping in the breeze.
The Silk Floss Tree is not native to California. It comes by way of the tropical and subtropical forests of South America. You can identify the tree by its spine-studded trunk and the five-petaled flowers that bloom in the cooler autumn months, which creates a mix of pink flowers and still-green leaves.

This particular specimen of Silk Floss Tree at the border of the Yamaguchi Bonsai Nursery stands taller than any surrounding building or new development. Like any tree you can purchase at a nursery, this Silk Floss Tree began its life in a five-gallon bucket. It is possible that it came from one of the neighboring nurseries, now long out of business.

1905 Sawtelle Blvd

1. Silk Floss Tree (Ceiba speciosa)
Soon after Yamaguchi Bonsai Nursery had been established in 1949, there were about 30 nurseries operating in the Sawtelle area. This nursery district was integral to gardeners’ work in neighborhoods beyond their own—neighborhoods like Bel Air, Brentwood, and Beverly Hills. It might be possible to say that during its heyday this area was the most concentrated supplier of greenery for Los Angeles.

Bonsai trees, Yamaguchi’s specialty for over five decades and an attraction for enthusiasts across Los Angeles, require a tremendous amount of care. The trees don’t naturally grow in miniature form. They are trained, trimmed, pruned, and styled to emulate a large tree on a small scale.

In addition to these bonsai, Yamaguchi Bonsai Nursery serves the community with a wide array of flowers, plants, and trees.
The four Hashimoto brothers opened O.K. Nursery in 1928 on the corner of Sawtelle Boulevard and La Grange Avenue, on the site of the former YMCA.

The nursery closed when the brothers split up before World War II. Two returned to Japan, and two were incarcerated in the Manzanar War Relocation Center. When the war ended and the brothers were released, the four reunited and reopened the nursery under the name Hashimoto Brothers Nursery.

The nursery currently stands on the same block of its original location. It had specialized in fuchsia, a plant that is not native to California nor to Japan. The entire lot had once been filled with fuchsia. A plant disease and shifting customer needs prompted Hashimoto to pivot away from fuchsia and towards being a more general supply nursery. Still, there are some red fuchsia available for sale, hanging in pots variously through the aisles.
1. Yamaguchi Bonsai Nursery, 1905 Sawtelle Blvd, Nursery
2. Hashimoto Nursery (founded as O.K. Nursery), 1935 Sawtelle Blvd, Nursery
3. Tabuchi Nursery, 2001 Sawtelle Blvd, Nursery
4. F.K. Nursery, 2020 Federal Ave, Nursery
5. A.I. Nursery, 2227 Barrington Ave, Parking Lot
6. Asahi Nursery, Olympic Blvd and Cotner Ave, Freeway
7. Equitable Nursery, 11020 Pico Blvd, Parking Lot
8. Harada Nursery, 1900 Sawtelle Blvd, Construction Site
9. Home Grown Nursery, 2335 Sawtelle Blvd, Big-box Electronics Store
10. Ishii Nursery, 11178 Santa Monica Blvd, Freeway
11. Kobe Nursery, 2251 Colby Ave, Parking Lot
12. Minami Nursery, 2113 Barrington Ave, Grocery Store
13. New Olympic Nursery, 2215 Pontius Ave, Office Space
14. O.K. Nursery, 1947 Sawtelle Blvd, Recreational Center
15. Olympic Blvd Nursery, 11566 Olympic Blvd, Electronics Store
16. Sawtelle Blvd Nursery, 2238 Sawtelle Blvd, Storage Facility
17. Sepulveda Blvd Nursery, 2029 Sepulveda Blvd, Automotive Shop
18. Sunny Side Nursery, 11315 Olympic Blvd, Shopping Center
19. Weston Pansy Garden, 2357 Pontius Ave, Outdoor Store
Just down the street on Corinth is the Japanese Institute of Sawtelle (JIS), dedicated in 1929.

JIS is home for the Sawtelle Gakuin, a Japanese language school, that began in 1925 in a private residence and continues to teach Japanese language classes today. The world famous Sawtelle Judo Dojo and Sawtelle Kendo Dojo have been housed in the JIS building as well. If you are around between 6pm and 10pm, Monday through Saturday, both Dojos invite the community to come visit and catch a glimpse of their practice. The building was shut down during the illegal incarceration of Japanese and Japanese Americans during World War II, and re-opened soon after the US government began closing concentration camps.

While in transit to the JIS building, notice the movement of the palm fronds nearby. Is the sun out? How are you dressed? Stop along the sidewalk, wait. A photograph of the Sawtelle Japanese School was taken here, on March 21, 1942. It shows a large group of individuals waiting to embark to a War Relocation Center. They are dressed formally, and they are loaded with large suitcases wrapped in straps. A palm provides a little bit of shade. Do they choose to stand in the shade to find relief? With the 200 mile bus ride ahead of them, can they even hear the sound the palm trees make in the breeze?

In 1992, after almost 30 years of activism from former incarcerated and the non-profit Manzanar Committee, the Manzanar War Relocation Center was designated a National Historic Site. Oral histories with survivors have directed decades of archaeological unearthing of Japanese gardens built by prisoners at the camp. These gardens were found among garbage, all burned by the U.S. Army after closing the camp.
At Manzanar, two hundred miles north of Sawtelle, nestled between the towering Eastern Sierras and Inyos, occupying land where a century ago the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power staked its claim on the water, the land of homesteaders’ failed fruit farms, the home of the Paiute, the landscape is almost pleasant. The brush after a rainy winter is unexpectedly tall, rubbing against your shins, and tall cottonwood trees provide some shade at the peripheries, likely marking a deep stream of water flowing underneath. This experience of Manzanar now challenges the imagination.

The over 10,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans held at Manzanar did not know the desert as a vast expanse of beautiful California landscape, but rather as a crowded, windy, dusty place. The living spaces were packed tightly together, and the latrines were exposed without dividers. There was nowhere to be alone. The Japanese Americans forcibly held at Manzanar, and several other locations in the United States after Executive Order 9066, were bound by the barbed wire fences that told them, “You only belong here.”

Walking the grounds today, you can find rusted remains of tin can lids, dry water spigots near the footprints of barracks, and empty water ponds that were once gardens Manzanar detainees built and cared for. The Japanese who were held here for three years hauled many of the stones from the surrounding mountain slopes and deliberately arranged them around concrete basins. The ponds were constructed using the three bags of concrete each housing block received monthly from the War Relocation Authority.

Manzanar War Relocation Center
The gardeners dug into the sand, poured concrete, and laid rocks to create edges and waterfalls. Some ponds had deeper sections and small caves where the koi fish could keep cool in the summer and warm in the winter. One of the men, Ryozo Kado, specialized in forming concrete to take the appearance of wood. He colored and molded the concrete and etched wood grain precisely onto the surface. Examples of his work appear throughout Manzanar.

To a visitor, the gardens challenge the imagination. What motivated the Japanese imprisoned here to build these gardens? To resist those who held them? To create a sense of normalcy? To pass the time? To have a nice place to go? It could be an answer held within memory, revealed in glimpses in archives, oral histories, and the knowledge of park rangers.

The fastidiously kept government documentation bears witness to the over 10,000 people kept at Manzanar. Rosters show many of the Japanese came from West Los Angeles. How many of them did business at the nurseries along Sawtelle Boulevard and gardened across Los Angeles? How many of the gardens at Manzanar were predicated by gardens tended in Bel Air, Beverly Hills, Brentwood, and other neighborhoods that excluded the Japanese? After November 12, 1945, when Manzanar was abandoned, how many of the Japanese gardeners brought Manzanar back?
The West Los Angeles Buddhist Temple is a good place to introduce yourself to the features of Japanese gardens in Sawtelle front yards. The garden wraps around the building. Just as you have been wandering through the neighborhood, the style of the garden is also meant to move in a similar fashion. The space avoids symmetry, and it does not privilege any one angle of viewing. For example, study the pines. The branches and clusters of green needles are carefully pruned into shapes, both rounded and flat. The cleanliness of the cuts suggest constant care and attention. Stones are arranged on the ground to guide your vision along a path, calmly interrupted by different styles of lanterns.

5. West Los Angeles Buddhist Temple

2003 Corinth Ave
While walking down Corinth Avenue, keep in mind that there are three possible views you can take: perpendicular from the front, close and facing down towards the garden, and from an angle.

There isn’t a particular route to take when you walk down a block, so feel free to pick a side or to cross over. Just keep watch for passing cars and always put safety first. A meandering path is encouraged, as any one angle of the gardens is not privileged.

Many of the bungalows still have well-tended Japanese gardens in the front yards, and together create an outdoor community-sponsored garden of sorts. Bonsai-like pines, stones, and lanterns are few of the elements to notice.

The same meandering path is encouraged on other streets too, like Butler, Colby, and Federal.
View from the Ground
At the northwest corner of Stoner and Mississippi, you’ll find an air raid siren built in 1940. This is one of over 200 air raid sirens in Los Angeles and is an intact model SD-10 “wire spool” siren. The Los Angeles Historic Resources Inventory states this siren “represents an important phase in the history of civil defense during World War II and the Cold War.”

This air raid siren is at an edge with no foot traffic, the periphery of Sawtelle. This air siren is a constant physical reminder, a lightning rod of memories of a dark time. This “important phase” emptied out the neighborhood. Japanese Americans were forced to leave their homes, businesses, and livelihoods.

The siren was cut off in 1986 with the others around Los Angeles. Despite the other changes in the neighborhood, it hasn’t been torn down.
Approaching Stoner Park you might notice the sounds of children playing in the pool. Near the sidewalk on Stoner Avenue, you'll find the Japanese garden that was established in 1931. This place is an excellent example of Japanese gardens as they are designed for the public: as a space to facilitate community ties.

The Japanese community in Sawtelle presented this garden, according to one of the plaques here, “for the promotion of better understanding.” Here also you can see the list of names of those individuals that dedicated the garden.

The garden was nearly lost due to neglect while the nikkei were illegally imprisoned in concentration camps. The people listed on the plaque were likely all taken to Manzanar camp or another War Relocation Act camp. In the 1950s the garden was restored by the Bay Cities Gardeners Association with support of the local Sawtelle nurseries. In 1989, Dr. Koichi Kawana, a UCLA MFA graduate, redesigned the garden, along with the Bay Cities Gardeners Association, into what it is today.

As the Japanese came back from concentration camps and re-established their lives, the Sotel 13 gang began establishing itself in the neighborhood as well, and Stoner Park became the heart of Sotel 13 territory. In 1976, under the direction of legendary Chicana activist Judithe Hernández, the gang and members of the community painted a mural for peace and for, you could say, the promotion of better understanding. Records or writing concerning the interaction between the Chicana/o and Japanese American communities are not easily found, if they exist at all. Even when we’re looking for a counter-history to a place, there’s more counter to be had.
Before its demolition the Westside YMCA spanned the whole block between Sawtelle and Corinth along La Grange. For four decades, it had stood as a central community space in the neighborhood. The landscaping around the building included pruned Japanese pine trees, similar to the homes you’ve seen throughout the tour. The O.K. Nursery founded by the four Hashimoto brothers once occupied this site. Instead of two-story walls and a roof, its boundaries were short, hollow cinder brick walls.

This tour’s first iteration through Sawtelle, drafted for a class in Urban Humanities at UCLA, had this to say about the site:

_The Y may not last much longer. It was supposed to have already been demolished this past year to make way for a new development, a 73 residential unit mixed-use building._ Tongva activists and residents of Sawtelle countered the development, now at a standstill. Its timeline is unknown.
As you make your way through the end of the tour, you can use the height of the Silk Floss Tree to help you navigate back to Sawtelle Boulevard. If you take this tour in the early spring, around March and April, you might see the boulevard decorated with the pink flowers of cherry blossom trees. Disease, intense drought, and old age have taken a toll on the cherry blossom trees in Sawtelle, but a few can still be found around the intersection of Sawtelle Boulevard and Mississippi Avenue.

How about we consider a tree to be a kind of timeline. The roots being the past, the branches reaching out towards the future, the concentric rings of the trunk forming layers. The length and breadth and weight of it are accumulations of history. The Silk Floss Tree at the border of the Yamaguchi Bonsai Nursery stands taller than any surrounding building or new development. It is bigger than you think.
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botanicalgardensofsawtelle@gmail.com
instagram.com/botanicalgardensofsawtelle

Sara Bond
Clarissa Brunt-Pluta
Andrés Carrasquillo
Ariel Hernandez
Kenny Wong

Endnotes

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7. Air Raid Siren 049. Los Angeles Historic Resources Inventory. <http://historicplacesla.org/reports/6a98e103-d5ae-45ca-8aad-efed375481ff>
17. Lecture by Dr. Wendy Teeter and Professor Mishuana Goeman to UCLA Urban Humanities Initiative. (2016, September 03).

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