

Japan's garden diplomacy aims to rescue foreign plots

By Julian Ryall in Tokyo

TOKYO is to dispatch a team of green-fingered "diplomats" around the world to revive traditional Japanese gardens.

The project is a response to appeals for help from caretakers of Japanese gardens overseas and now renovations will be funded by Japan's ministry of land and infrastructure.

There are at least 30 Japanese-style gardens in the UK and while the vast majority are well tended, Japanese experts have had to step in to rescue properties from falling into disrepair.

Virginia Morton-Thurtle, manager of the Japanese Garden in St Mawgan, Cornwall, said Japanese estates needed constant, labour-intensive care.

"We have to have someone in the garden every day and very often two people," she told *The Daily Telegraph*.

"At this time of year, a lot of the work is picking up leaves to make sure they

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do not turn to mulch in the gravel paths, but we have to keep on top of any damage that is caused by the weather. Then we have to keep the topiary in shape and constantly keep an eye on the bamboo, which spreads like crazy if you let it.

"Overall, it's a lot more work than a traditional English garden," she added.

The historic garden at Cowden Castle, in Clackmannanshire, was reopened in 2016 more than 50 years after it was vandalised.

Originally laid out in the first decade of the last century, the garden was the work of Taki Handa and incorporated many of the key elements of a traditional Japanese garden, including a pond and island, a "walking garden" and a garden surrounding a tea house.

Damage to the site meant that none of the original structures had survived, but a Japanese professor of gardening uncovered the original design and began the process of getting it restored.

More than 500 Japanese-style gardens have been laid out abroad, with a study suggesting that at least 40 properties are in need of care.

A five-strong team of experts will initially be tasked with rejuvenating gardens in California and Romania, with other projects to be selected once the work has been completed.

The first overseas Japanese garden was unveiled at the Vienna World Exhibition in 1873, catching the attention of visitors and prompting a surge of interest in Japanese culture.