

Ojiichan's Gift — Teaching Guide

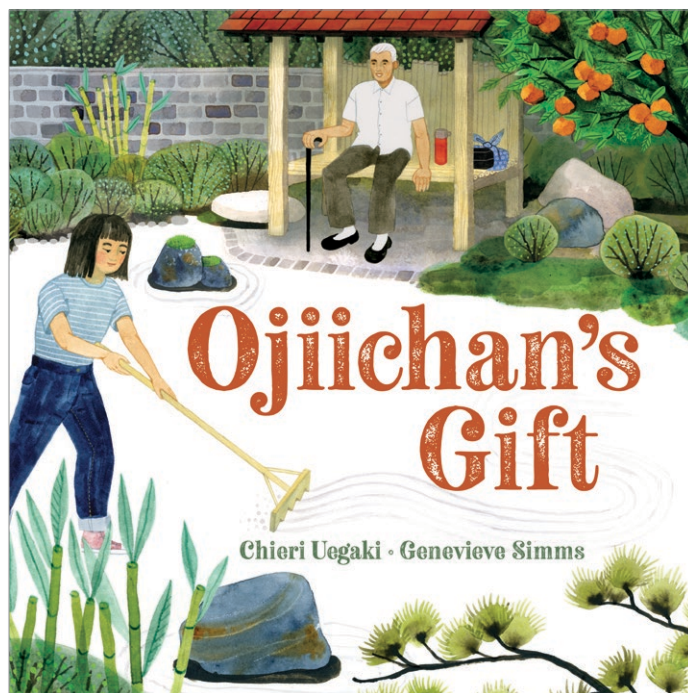
About the Book

When Mayumi was born, her grandfather created a garden for her. It was unlike any other garden she knew. It had no flowers or vegetables. Instead, Ojiichan made it out of stones: “big ones, little ones and ones in between.” Every summer, Mayumi visits her grandfather in Japan, and they tend the garden together. Raking the gravel is her favorite part. Afterward, the two of them sit on a bench and enjoy the results of their efforts in happy silence. But then one summer, everything changes. Ojiichan has grown too old to care for his home and the garden. He has to move. Will Mayumi find a way to keep the memory of the garden alive for both of them?

This gentle story will warm children's hearts as it explores a deep intergenerational bond and the passing of knowledge from grandparent to grandchild over time. The lyrical text by Chieri Uegaki and luminous watercolor illustrations by Genevieve Simms beautifully capture the emotional arc of the story, from Mayumi's contentment through her anger and disappointment to, finally, her acceptance. The story focuses on an important connection to nature, particularly as a place for quiet reflection. It contains character education lessons on caring, responsibility, perseverance and initiative. It's also a wonderful way to introduce social studies conversations about family, aging and multiculturalism. Mayumi lives in North America with her Japanese mother and Dutch father, and visits her grandfather in Japan. Some Japanese words are included.

About the Author

CHIERI UEGAKI is a second-generation Japanese Canadian who was born in Quesnel, British Columbia. When she was one year old, Chieri and her parents moved to East Vancouver, where she and her two younger sisters grew up. Chieri's first picture book, *Suki's Kimono*, was released in 2003. She has since written stories for Pearson Education, *Chirp* and *Chickadee* magazines, and has published three more picture books: *Rosie and Buttercup*; *Hana Hashimoto*, *Sixth Violin*; and, of course, *Ojiichan's Gift*.



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About the Illustrator

GENEVIEVE SIMMS studied illustration at the Alberta College of Art and Design and completed her master's degree in architecture at the University of Toronto in 2018. Genevieve has been illustrating for magazines since 2006, and has only recently begun to illustrate children's books. *Ojiichan's Gift* is Genevieve's first children's book. Genevieve is from St. John's, Newfoundland, but has also lived in Calgary, Wabasca and Edmonton, Alberta, and currently lives in Toronto, Ontario, with her husband and a mostly-beagle named Jack.



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About This Resource

Every text, even a picture book, can be a platform for children to better understand the world. Picture books in particular help young children develop their sense of self. When children look at pictures and illustrations, they are trying to place themselves and the people they know inside the story. It is important that students see themselves in the texts they encounter, and know that who they are is valued. Picture books also help children develop empathy and gain an understanding of the experiences of others. A curriculum that embraces diverse ways of being and lived realities gives students opportunities to learn about their own and other people's experiences, and this builds understanding and respect, as well as academic foundations and the desire to learn to read. The activities in this guide are aimed at exploring these themes.

Overview

	Grade	Activity Description
Pre-Activity	All	• Pre-reading for Prediction
Activity 1	All	• Group Reading and Discussion of Context
Activity 2	Pre-K–2: Small Groups	• Discussion of Illustrations and Themes
Activity 3	Pre-K–2: Independent	• Independent Illustrating
Activity 4	Grades 3–4: Independent	• Independent Writing
Post-Activity	All	• Make Your Own Rock Garden

Pre-Activity — Pre-reading for Prediction All ages, whole group

Show children the cover of *Ojiichan's Gift* and leaf through the entire book slowly. Make sure that children look closely at each page, but don't read the words yet. The important part of this activity is to understand that story can be communicated with pictures as well as words — which, of course, the children already know. Reinforcing this fact will give them confidence in their abilities to do the same thing in a later activity.

WHY THIS ACTIVITY IS IMPORTANT

Visual thinking is an important tool for children as they learn to read, and then as they master the skill. The illustrations in picture books help children understand the words they are reading, and if they review those images before hearing the story, they can compare their own predictions about the story with what they later read or hear. Furthermore, as children learn to read on their own, when they encounter difficulty with the words, the pictures will help them figure out the story.



SPREAD-BY-SPREAD DISCUSSION

On the first spread, point to the airplane and the family peeking out the window. Point to the house on the ground. Ask children what else they notice in this illustration. Some may mention the airplane pilots or the woman wearing headphones and sleeping. Some may mention the river on the ground, or the clouds in the sky.

On the second spread, ask children what they see. Don't offer any answers, but let them list the items in the illustration — from rocks, grass, trees and plants, to the shelter with a snack waiting for someone to eat it.

On the third spread, point out the growing child and the older man with her. Ask children what they seem to be doing in each different image. Try to avoid letting children who can read actually tell the story from the words. The focus right now is on the illustrations. Assure them that you will be reading the book shortly.

On the fourth spread, point to the girl — older now than she was even on the last page — and the man with her. What do they seem to be doing? Some children may say they're relaxing, or that they're resting after working hard. Point out the neat lines in the sand around the rocks, and that both the girl and the man have hats on the bench next to them. Ask children why they might need hats. Do they notice anything else? Someone may see that the man has a cane.

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On the fifth spread, ask: Where are we now? Some children may say the city, or on a street. Ask them to tell you what they see, and point out the small details on the page, including the plants and the cat in the windows of the houses. Ask students to name the items next to the tin box.

On the sixth spread, ask children what they think is happening. They may say someone's house is being packed up or someone is moving. Point out the light spots on the wall by the staircase and ask what they might be (spots where pictures used to hang). Do they have any ideas about who the people in this picture are? (The same family from the window of the airplane in the first spread). Point to the photograph still hanging on the wall and ask what children see (a man and a girl and a birthday cake).

On the seventh spread, ask if the students know who the people are, or where they are. Have we been here before in this story? Some children may say that this is the same garden with rocks, and that now the girl and the man are both older. Point to the boxes inside the house and ask if they can guess who might be moving.

When you turn the page to the **eighth spread,** explain to children the expression “bird’s-eye view.” Tell them that in this picture, we’re looking down at the garden as if we are a bird, and we can see from above. Point to the shadows made by the rocks and by the girl’s body. Ask students to tell you what else they notice about this unique perspective.

On the ninth spread, ask children to tell you how they think the girl is feeling, and what they think she is doing. Some may say that she is working hard, some may say she looks angry. Don’t try to direct their answers yet — at this stage they are just guessing about the story based on the pictures, and no answer is incorrect.

On the tenth spread, point to the girl’s facial expressions in both pictures and ask students to tell you how they think she is feeling now. Some may say angry, or surprised.

On the eleventh spread, the girl’s facial expression has changed. What do children see in it now? Some may say that she looks relaxed or accepting. What else do they see? Where is she and what is she doing?

On the twelfth spread, point out some of the minor details, such as the stripes on the girl’s socks, or the book the man is reading as he sits in his wheelchair. What do the children think she may be handing him in the second image? Any guesses are good guesses.

Where are the girl and the man **on the thirteenth spread?** Go back to the previous spread and show how they were on a porch, with the garden behind them. Now the girl seems to be down on the same level with the man, and the garden is much more visible. Do children think they have moved into the garden, or are they still on the porch? Helping students see how perspective is used in the illustrations will help them when they’re making their own illustrations.

On the fourteenth spread, where do the children think the characters are now? Some may guess they’re in the house in the city, which we saw from the outside. But some may not see that yet. It’s okay if they don’t. Welcome any answers, and ask children to point out everything they see in the girl’s room. If they don’t notice the photograph of the girl and the man with the birthday cake, point it out to them. What do they think it means that she brought the photograph with her?

What do children notice in the **last spread?** You may want to point out that we have seen the tin box and those items before, and you can peek back at the fifth spread, with the street view of the houses. Do the contents of the box remind children of anything they have seen in this book before? What do they think the girl has made? Some may say a small garden, like the big one from earlier in the book.

Ask children why they think the **last picture** is mostly in black and white, and what they think of the hand drawing lines in the sand. Some children may say that the black-and-white picture is showing a memory, since that image looks like one they have seen before. But if no one says anything, that’s okay. They will come to understand this when you read the story to them.

SUMMARY

In this pre-reading activity, you have given children the tools to trust their own interpretation of the illustrations. Even if some of them made incorrect predictions, the simple act of wondering about the story these pictures tell will make them more engaged readers. Because you have asked them what they think is going on in each spread, they will now be eager to see if they were right.

Tell children that it’s almost time to read the story aloud.



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GLOSSARY

Before you read the book, turn to the final page and discuss the glossary of Japanese terms. Read each word aloud, write it on the board, and ask the children to repeat it before reading its definition. The repetition of each Japanese word or word-part will help the terms become familiar to students as you read *Ojiichan's Gift* aloud.

Activity 1: Group Reading and Discussion of Context

All ages, whole group

Go back to the beginning of *Ojiichan's Gift* and read the story aloud to the group (or, for groups with students old enough to read, do a choral reading of the book).

Stop at the end of each page and discuss the illustrations now that students have the context of the story. When children are eager to talk more about the story and the pictures, stop reading and encourage the discussion.

SPREAD-BY-SPREAD NOTES:

Spread One: We know from the illustration in the airplane window that Mayumi comes from a mixed-race family. Her father is white and her mother is Asian. Based on the details of the story, children can infer that her mother comes from Japan.

It is likely they are flying to Japan from the West — perhaps a city in Canada. It's also possible her father is Dutch, because Mayumi's surname is van Horton.

Spread Two: Point out that even though there are lots of living plants surrounding the garden, such as the persimmon tree and moss, the main features of the garden are the rocks and gravel.

Spread Three: Ask children what they think it means to say that moss is “a gift of time” or why weeding might be more pleasant in the morning. Is it because it's cooler?

Spread Four: This is a good place to talk about language. The tiny rocks are “chattering” as they're raked, and they form “rings, like ripples in a pond.” Ask children to think about what these words communicate about the garden.

Spread Five: What do children think it means when the author describes Mayumi's house as “narrow,” and how does that differ from Ojiichan's garden? Also ask them how Mayumi uses the things she's brought back from the garden. Finally, ask what feeling is evoked with the last sentence on this spread? Some children may say fear or worry.

Spread Six: What do children think it means that Ojiichan can't live in his house anymore? How does the illustration show that he can't take care of the house or the garden anymore (eg., cobwebs in the corner). What else has changed? The author doesn't state directly that Ojiichan is getting too old to take care of himself, but the children have probably inferred that he has.

Spread Seven: Now Ojiichan is in a wheelchair, and Mayumi looks sad. The cobweb on the bamboo plant and the weeds in the garden show us that grandfather hasn't been able to care for it in some time.

Spread Eight: What do the children think Mayumi is feeling in this moment? How do they know how she feels — is it in the words, or in the picture or both?

Spread Nine: Now we can see the emotion on Mayumi's face — anger and sadness. Ask children to talk about why Mayumi thinks that pushing over a towering rock might make her feel better. How do the children know all of this if the words don't state it explicitly?

Spread Ten: Ask children if they can remember a time when they felt the way Mayumi seems to feel now. Have them tell you, or jot it down or draw a quick picture about it. They can return to this in a later activity if they want to.

Spread Eleven: Why does the author say that raking is something “useful” that she could do? How is it useful? What is Mayumi doing on this page? (She's setting things right. She's tending to the garden that was her gift when she was born.)

Spread Twelve: This is where children can use their prediction skills. Based on what we know about Mayumi, what she has just been doing, how she remembers the garden when she's back home in Canada, and based on the fact that Ojiichan says the box feels heavier than it would if it were just lunch, what do you think is in the box?



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Spread Thirteen: Ask children why Mayumi emphasizes the word “you” when she says “now I’ve made *you* a garden”? (It’s because Ojiichan made her a garden when she was born, and now she is doing the same for him, as he moves out of his tidy brown house and into his old age.)

Spread Fourteen: Ask children to point out items in Mayumi’s room that remind them of Ojiichan’s house. (The picture that had been on the wall of his house, with them and the birthday cake, is now on her bookshelf; she also has his slippers on the shelf in her room.) Ask them how the words on the page help them predict what Mayumi will make with these items. (They describe building a tiny garden, even without saying so directly.)

Spread Fifteen: Ask students if they remember the word “chattering” from earlier. Do they think Mayumi can really hear the stones chattering now? Why does she say that? You may discuss in more detail the meaning students find in the black-and-white picture at the end.



Now, having read the whole story through one time, lead children in a discussion of the cultural context of *Ojiichan's Gift*.

1. Show your students a map of the world and point to Japan, a series of islands east of China. Explain that Japanese rock gardens like the one Ojiichan makes for Mayumi were first developed almost 700 years ago.
2. These rock gardens are also sometimes called “Zen gardens” because they appear outside of Zen Buddhist temples. Explain that Zen Buddhism is a religion based on meditation, the appreciation of nature and self-control. Rock gardens help Zen Buddhists achieve these things.
3. Show students images of rock gardens and point out that they are made by carefully arranging rocks, pruned trees and bushes, and sand raked to look like the ripples in water. Some even have actual water features, such as ponds or streams, even though these gardens are also called “dry landscape gardens” because they can exist in places where a living garden could not thrive. For images of gardens, visit: <https://www.bestchoiceschools.com/25-most-inspiring-japanese-zen-gardens/>
4. Tell students that many rock gardens are designed so that visitors can appreciate them from a seated position somewhere just outside the garden, just like Mayumi and Ojiichan do in the story. Seated appreciation of nature is an important part of Zen Buddhism. Mayumi and Ojiichan can see their garden from the sheltered bench on the edge of the garden (page 9) and later in the book, from the porch of Ojiichan’s house (page 26).
5. Discuss some of the metaphorical meanings of the items found in many rock gardens. For instance, white gravel raked to look like a stream can represent the journey of life.
 - a) Tell students that one famous rock garden in Japan has a gravel stream that starts with a “waterfall” of small stones that look as though they’re cascading down a hill, which represents birth. The stream of stones then appears to pass through rapids, and the “river” is filled with larger rocks, which represents the speed and excitement of youth. Finally, the stream of stones ends in a calm “sea” of white gravel, which represents the quiet and slow time of old age.
 - b) Ask students if any of these themes sound familiar from their reading of *Ojiichan's Gift*. Begin a discussion with the whole group about the various stages of life, and how the story begins with Mayumi’s birth and ends with Ojiichan’s old age.
6. Now discuss miniature rock gardens, like the one Mayumi makes for Ojiichan at the end of the story.
 - a) These have become popular more recently, and kits are available for sale in various stores and online. People can also make their own with simple supplies (see the post-activity). Your students might see these in the waiting rooms of doctor’s offices, and they are meant to be interacted with. The tiny rake is there for people to smooth out the stones, making streams and ripples. Many people find this activity relaxing.
7. Tell students that Zen rock gardens — the full-sized ones as well as the miniature ones — are intended to help people reconnect with nature and the natural world. In *Ojiichan's Gift*, Mayumi comes to terms with the fact that aging is natural. Later, she makes Ojiichan his own tiny garden so that he can stay connected to nature as he moves on through life’s journey.

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PREDICTIONS

To conclude your whole-group discussion, ask students to think about and comment on the predictions they made about the story when you reviewed the illustrations.

1. Now that children know what happens in the story, and the context of Japanese rock gardens, what do they think are some of the most important lessons in this story?
 - a) Let this conversation go on for as long as you have time, or let this discussion lead into Activity 2 (for children in Pre-K to Grade 2), small group discussions of the themes in the story and how the illustrations help to communicate them.

Activity 2: Discussion of Illustrations and Themes Pre-K–2, small groups

Break students up into small groups for this discussion of the themes in *Ojiichan's Gift*. The goal is to have one adult in each group, so group sizing depends on how many adults are available. This discussion can happen in a large-group setting if you're teaching on your own, but children will be more likely to talk if the groupings are more intimate.

Begin by asking children what they think the story is about. Some answers may include Mayumi and her grandfather or a Japanese garden. Steer children to the topics of aging and the journey of life.

Point out that for the first five spreads, everyone in the story is happy and healthy. But there is a turn in the story on the sixth spread (pages 10–11), when Mayumi and her parents come to Japan to help her grandfather pack up his house.



Ask if any of the children in your group have experienced an aging family member. Encourage them to talk about how they feel when things change — such as when a grandparent can no longer walk quickly or lift a child, or maybe when one has had to move, as Ojiichan did.

Review Mayumi's facial expressions in the illustrations on spreads seven, nine and ten. Ask for volunteers to tell you how Mayumi is feeling in each of these pictures. On spread seven, students might say sad or worried. On spreads nine and ten, students may say angry or confused.

Hand out pieces of paper and colored pencils and ask students to draw themselves feeling those feelings. If they can think of a time when they felt sad, worried or angry, ask them to name it and you can write the word or phrase as a label under their pictures. Students may have already thought of what to draw in an earlier activity, but some might need help brainstorming.

Now turn to spread eleven, and ask students if Mayumi's feelings about the changes in her grandfather's life are different now. Some students will say yes, and they should be encouraged to tell you what they think helped Mayumi's mood change.

Ask children to tell you if they have ever had an experience like that, where they went from being very sad or angry to feeling calm and accepting. Ask them to draw themselves feeling calm and accepting, and label their pictures again.

Activity 3: Independent Illustrating Pre-K–2, individual

For this activity, open the book to spread eight and discuss again the concept of the bird's-eye view. Point out the roofs of Ojiichan's house and the garden shelter, the top of Mayumi's head and the tops of the rocks — which now look all about the same size because their heights can't be seen from this angle.

Hand out paper and colored pencils, and give students as much time as you can to draw something — it doesn't have to be related to the themes in the book — from the perspective of the bird's-eye view.

Collect and display the drawings on a board in the classroom.



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Activity 4: Independent Writing Grades 3–4, individual

For students old enough to begin writing their own stories, give them the following prompt:

Think of a time you did something with someone much older than you. Maybe the person is a grandparent or a friend of the family. Write about what you did. How did the difference in your ages impact your activities?

Encourage students to illustrate their stories. As they're working, walk around and ask them questions. Some students might have many ideas but need help expressing them. Others might not know what to write about, and they may need help brainstorming.

Post-Activity: Make Your Own Rock Garden All ages, small groups or individuals

Gather the materials on the list below, and build miniature stone gardens in small groups or individually. Encourage students to be creative with what they add to their gardens, and to work to make them neat and tidy. Remind them that a Zen garden is a place to meditate on the beauty of nature and the journey of life.

Materials list:

- Small cardboard box or the lid of a shoe box
- Sandbox sand
- Stones, ranging from coin-sized to the size of potatoes
- Leaves or pine cones
- Pencils, Popsicle sticks or pipe cleaners (to use as a rake)

