

2010

STARS *of San Diego*

PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY BY GARY PAYNE

FOR OUR SECOND ANNUAL SALUTE TO SOME of the most gifted members of our region's deep reservoir of talent in the fields of art, design and craftsmanship, we have chosen 10 honorees who have all woven their places of distinction in the rich and varied tapestry that is San Diego County.

Our 2010 Stars of San Diego are:

A woodworker who can build anything from a functional chair to a work of fine art; a designer of unforgettable Japanese gardens; an architect who has designed what's been called "the finest house in the world"; a botanical illustrator/instructor whose timeless work graces collectors' walls and three published books; a coppersmith who handcrafts glorious finials, fireplaces, whimsical gargoyles and more; an interior designer whose sophisticated ideas enhance everything from downtown studio lofts to historic La Jolla mansions; a glass artist known for her beautiful mind-bending creations; a metal/jewelry artist whose artistry would be at home in a children's fairy tale or a royal palace; a ceramic artist whose timeless tiles and pottery reside in the homes of thousands of San Diegans and more than a few Hollywood stars; and a storyteller who tells his tales with paintings and sculpture.



2010

TAKENDO ARII

garden designer

BY NEAL MATTHEWS

JAPAN IS WET AND MOSSY; CALIFORNIA IS DRY AND rocky. So how do you create a Japanese garden in Southern California's dry chaparral? "You water the rocks," says Takendo Aarii, who designed the gardens at Escondido's Golden Door spa.

During the five-year effort (1976-1981), Aarii collected boulders and rocks from construction sites throughout North County, where contractors were more than happy for him to haul them away. These he placed strategically throughout the property, with an eye toward balance and harmony. For the dry meditation garden he chose boulders with lichen attached. And even though the peaceful patch of raked white sand seems to contain no plants at all, he installed a sprinkler system timed to spray water on the boulders so the lichen would display its patchy swaths of milky green and faint pink. It's his signature subversive approach to the stylized naturalism that characterizes classic Japanese gardens.

Deborah Szekely, the founder and proprietress of the Golden Door, wrote in a letter of recommendation that Aarii "made the most important and the most lasting contribution to the Golden Door ... and because of Taki I can proudly say (and this has been echoed by

hundreds of my guests who have been to Japan) we have one of half a dozen of the finest Japanese inns in the world, rated on a par with the very best that Japan has produced over a span of centuries."

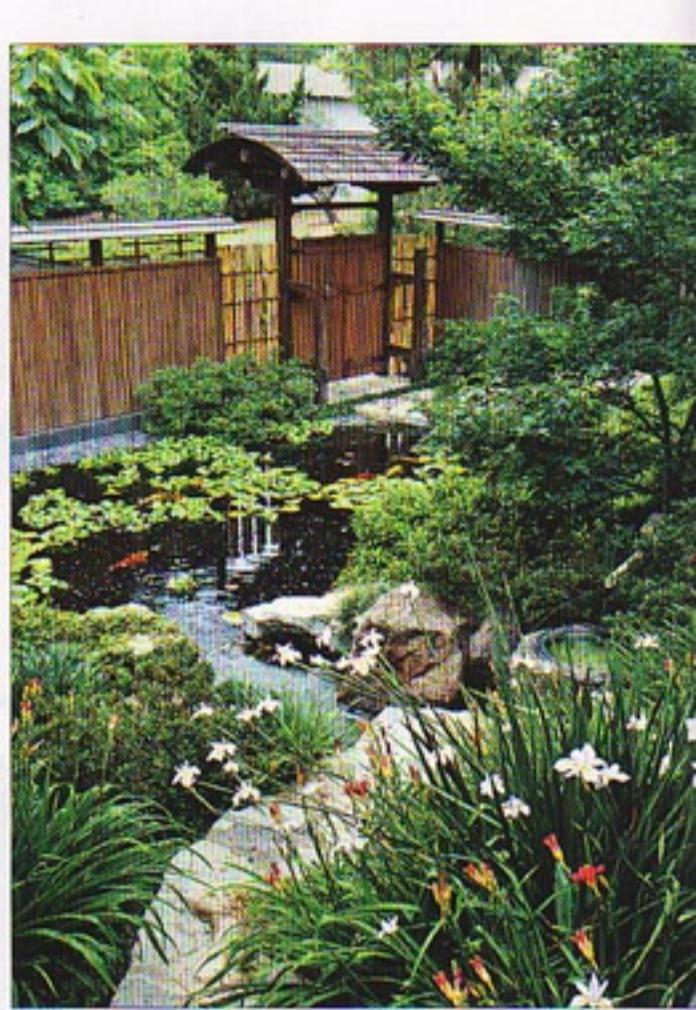
Aarii is 67 and lives with his wife, Motoko, in a townhouse in University City. Since arriving on these shores with a permanent residency visa in 1969, the master Japanese garden designer has lived more of the American Dream than most Americans. He's designed Japanese gardens for SeaWorld and for private residences from Malibu to Coronado, and won the 2004 Garden of the Year from *San Diego Home/Garden Lifestyles* for a garden in Mount Helix.

In 1970, after working as a designer for a Pasadena landscaping company, he was hired by SeaWorld to take charge of their Japanese Village gardens in San Diego,

Opposite: Takendo Aarii and one of the gardens he designed at the Golden Door in Escondido.

Below: This garden that Takendo Aarii designed for a Mount Helix residence won San Diego Home/Garden Lifestyles' 2004 Gardens of the Year competition. Photograph by Will Gullette.







Ohio and Florida. "I always visited Japanese Friendship gardens all over the country when I could take a break," says Arii. "I learned the difference between good and bad garden design." He also developed his personal style of adapting to and using the local resources. "A Japanese garden doesn't mean it has to look like Japan. Most of the gardens I visited used stones, teahouse lumber, trees, everything from Japan. My dream was to not import, but use what was local."

As a boy in Yokohama, Arii loved to draw, and he built a fish and turtle pond when he was 13. Now most of his designs incorporate water courses or waterfalls. "Movement and sound, that's very important," he explains. "A Japanese garden is an expression, a composition with accent, emphasis. No monotony. Every day, something changes. You never get tired of looking at a Japanese garden."

After high school, when most of his friends were going on to study architecture and engineering, Arii decided he didn't want all that competition for jobs. And he wanted to really like whatever he ended up doing for a living.

"I liked architecture, but I thought, 'What always goes along with building design?' It's the landscaping *around* the architecture." So he enrolled in Tokyo Agricultural University, the only school he could find with a landscape design program. On a year of foreign study in the United States, he took one look at the Golden Gate Bridge with San Francisco in the background, "And I said to myself, *'This is the place to work and live.'*"

It was difficult to emigrate from Japan to the U.S. in the late '60s, as most of the immigration quotas went to Europeans, not Asians. But when Arii applied for

a visa an American immigration officer singled him out and suggested he apply for a rare permanent residency visa as a professional Japanese landscape architect. As he waited for approval he met his future wife, Motoko, at a Bible camp, and worked as an apprentice/laborer for renowned Japanese garden designer Juki Iida, designer of about 3,000 gardens around Tokyo as well as the Seattle Arboretum's Japanese Garden. He kept meticulous notes and drawings. When he was told to remove an intricate bamboo fence, he drew each piece, reverse-engineering it into a notebook he would use in the future. "This was a very, very precious time to me," he recalls.

One reason he's been so successful is his ability to conceive and draw on paper his vision for each particular garden. And when his plans move from sketches to formal blueprints, his artful draftsmanship jumps off the page. Looking over his drawings for a garden around a house in Laguna Beach, he points out where he turned a boring walkway toward the front door into a quietly grand entrance with a water feature and winding stepping-stones.

"See, I like to eliminate shortcuts and create curiosity," he says. "What's behind that bamboo fence? The garden is an imaginary world, where a rock is a kind of island."



Unlike in Japan, where houses and gardens pass down through several generations of the same family, American houses get bought and sold by strangers. So many of Arii's garden designs last only as long as the current occupant.

"Maintenance of a Japanese garden is so important," he says. "In thinking three to five years ahead, the plants aren't the problem. It's the maintenance man. The garden changes with the seasons, and skill is needed to keep it in shape. Harmony, balance, movement, and sound — no garden maintains that by itself." ❧

Where to find it, page 127

Opposite: Takendo Arii uses local sources for his Japanese gardens. Here's a gallery of some that he has designed in San Diego County. Movement and sound are key elements in his gardens.

This page: Detail of a purple iris.

Photography by Will Gullette.

Highlights

EDUCATION

- ★ Studied Japanese garden design, Tokyo Agricultural University

NOTEWORTHY

- ★ 2004 Gardens of the Year award from *San Diego Home/Garden Lifestyles* for a garden in Mount Helix
- ★ Designed Japanese Village gardens for all SeaWorld parks in the United States
- ★ Designed the gardens for the Golden Door resort in Escondido
- ★ Has designed Japanese gardens in Southern California from Malibu to Coronado, some on projects with San Diego architectural designer Wallace Cunningham