

SATURDAY, MARCH 11, 2000

# Home and Garden

## GARDEN CLIPPINGS

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JOHN BURGESS/PRESS DEMOCRAT

**Sculptural landscape:** Artist Suzanne Biaggi displays some of her work in her Petaluma garden: A stone carpet with a sun mirror and blue planter. In addition to her sculpture work, Biaggi also has been a landscape designer since 1984.



# Gardens of stone

## SF garden show helped Biaggi make her mark

STORIES BY MEG McCONAHEY  
Staff Writer

**L**arry and Melissa Lasky knew they wanted a sculpture to dress up a problematic and plain space — the courtyard that served as the entrance to their Muir Beach home.

But they didn't just want a piece of stone plunked onto a patio. They wanted the whole courtyard to make a visual statement — and to serve as a quiet counterpoint to the dramatically distracting ocean views on the other side of their home.

When they browsed at the Mill Valley Sculpture Garden, it was Suzanne Biaggi's work that captured their eyes, not simply because they liked the way she seemed to respect the integrity of the stone with which she worked, but because she respected the integrity of the space in which it would be placed. Biaggi would install the piece in a setting that itself was a work of art.

The Laskys commissioned not just a sculpture but a sculptural landscape, in which the granite megalith is one component in a garden design where every plant, every stone, every pathway, is carefully placed to complete a three-dimensional sculptural picture.

"What appealed to me was Suzanne's com-

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## Stone

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ination of Asian and European influences and also her combination of different textures," said Larry Lasky of Biaggi's singular, striking and slightly eccentric works of garden art.

Biaggi is the rare artist who also is a skilled garden designer and who, when called upon, will meld the two into what she calls "Sculptural Landscapes."

The Petaluma artist has been a landscape designer since 1984. But it wasn't until she translated her esoteric ideas into her own show garden at the big San Francisco Flower and Garden Show in 1995, that she really began establishing a name. That first year a designer, under contract for pop singer/composer Lionel Richie, bought the sculpture right out of the show garden for Richie's Beverly Hills home.

The fact that Biaggi, then struggling with only modest success, would connect with a homeowner and client with the spending power of a Lionel Richie, demonstrates the marketing power of the San Francisco show, one of the largest garden shows in the country and the place to go to introduce products and services related to America's favorite hobby.

Some 60,000 people battled the crowds at the Cow Palace last year to marvel at the elaborate showpiece gardens created like movie sets by some of the Bay Area's top garden designers. This year, the show is expected to draw 20,000 more.

Biaggi won't be doing a garden for this year's show, running Thursday through March 19, again at the Cow Palace. She cleared the competitive application process to be accepted as a show garden exhibitor. But she got so sick in December, she was unable to do much of the preparation work for the enormous task of creating a life-sized garden complete with props.

Biaggi however, will share her vision in a seminar on "The Garden as Art Form: How a Garden Becomes Sculpture," one of 75 free seminars offered by Sunset Magazine during the four-day event. Biaggi appears at 7:30 p.m. Friday

in The Tamaulips Room.

Among the other North Bay specialists sharing their garden wisdom in seminars are garden writer, HGTV personality and Press Democrat restaurant critic Jeff Cox, discussing "Landscaping With Roses" (noon Saturday in the Hamilton Room,) and Bob Hornback of Muchas Grasses talking about "Fantastic Foliage: Grasses and Grass-like Plants" (4:15 p.m. Thursday in the Hamilton Room,) part of a panel symposium on "New and Cool Plants" put on by Pacific Horticulture.

Biaggi has conducted courses at College of Marin and City College in San Francisco on the the garden and sculpture. But this will be the first time she will conduct a seminar at the garden show, exploring her concepts as well as the long history of sculptural landscapes dating back to the Renaissance.

Biaggi freely borrows from many ideas and styles to come up with looks distinctively her own.

"I think the influences come from so many different sources," she says. "I lived in Italy a number of years. There was the influence of the mannerist gardens which have a slight bit of off-centeredness to them. I've certainly looked at the classical French gardens. I've studied the formality of Japanese gardens and spent time in Japan. And my whole background is sculpture. I have a master's in sculpture. So as you go through life, you experience these things, you pick them up and you carry them with you and they pop out in different forms at different times."

For the Lasky courtyard, for instance, Biaggi divided up the square courtyard into geometric shaped planters, off-balanced, with contrasting textures and shapes of either plant or stone within them. Some of the shapes echo each other in different areas of the space. Stones in one area, echo the stones in the sculpture area. The grasses are soft, but also have a rounded geometric shapes.

She uses few minimal plants types — only bamboo, mondo grass and some Japanese maples, one maple in a bright red pot that becomes on the single splash of color in the courtyard.

Water wells up in a round basin

in the focal point sculpture, overflows and cascades down the side of the sculpture along a little carved ladder in the granite.

"Usually my work is about contrasts," she explains, "and the relationships between opposites."

The gardens, or garden spaces she designs, have a minimalist look, and are purposely asymmetrical or off-center to create interest.

In the lavish garden of Sarah Nichols in Petaluma, Biaggi a small part to create a garden room, a "petite Bouchard" called "The Garden on Convergence," which exploits contrasts and uses a minimalist palette of plants. She designed a circle into four sections, two with mounding, gray-green festuca and two with a reddish-purple euphorbia. The two plants meet where two pathways converge at an angle.

The space uses angles and circles, themes that recur throughout the 1/4 acre.

"This is for people who are looking at the garden as more of an artistic, creative endeavor," she says. "My idea is for a garden as a work of art — you are pushing the limits of the definition of a garden because you are using things in a manner that aren't ordinarily seen."

In her west Petaluma garden, where she fabricates her stone sculptures, Biaggi has set aside her own sculptural corner, with a 4-by-6-foot cut stone "carpet." Everything in the space has a sculptural purpose, even the funky blue plastic chairs arranged and used in an unexpected way — as stands for potted plants.

Biaggi's resume is expanding. Her pieces can now be found in the collections of Isaac Stern, the late Frank Sinatra, and the San Francisco home of Kirk Hammett, lead guitarist for Metallica, who also commissioned a sculptural land-



JOHN BURGESS/PRESS DEMOCRAT

A gargoyle keeps company with a cactus in the garden of Suzanne Biaggi's Petaluma home.

scape to install them in.

"I think it's more than than a pretty place," she says of her quirk garden corners, designs, which would never be found in the page of a conventional idea book in the racks of Home Depot, but which serve as places of regeneration within the garden.

"It's a place that has a certain energy, a certain feeling to it. It could be a place that's quite and peaceful. It could be a place that incite creative thought. But it's something that is beyond one's ordinary life. I think that is what art is about. You want to experience something that speaks to you on a certain level."

Suzanne Biaggi's Sculptural Landscapes can be reached by calling 762-0753 or (415) 781-4812.