

# Osmosis Spa garden steeped in peace

Freestone spot designed around Zen Buddhist parable



Photo: Brant Ward, The Chronicle

*Michael Stusser helped build Osmosis Spa garden on a former junkyard. The truck, below, is a reminder of the site's past.*

## Yvonne Michie Horn

In the tiny hamlet of Freestone in Sonoma County, a quiet dance goes on in the Zen-inspired serenity of the gardens surrounding Osmosis Spa. The dance is between a master pruner in the Japanese tradition, and the shrub or tree about to receive his attention.

"I have a move in mind that has to do with the garden's scale and points of interest," Michael Alliger says. "The plant, however, instinctively knows what its own next move is supposed to be."

The dance begins with a snap of his clippers. Will the plant respond to his lead? "Sometimes the dance between the garden's concept and the natural plant doesn't work," he says. At that point, the plant is removed from the garden.

The garden, which has seen Alliger's practiced hand since its beginning, is the culmination of a long-held dream of Osmosis' owner and founder, Michael Stusser. "Thirty-one years ago," Stusser says, "I visited a Japanese garden in Kyoto and experienced such a profound sense of inner peace that I returned later that year to begin an apprenticeship in landscape gardening." While there, he discovered cedar enzyme baths, a rejuvenating heat treatment well known in Japan. In 1985, he returned to California to establish a spa featuring enzyme baths that he named Osmosis.

"For 17 years, I was absorbed in the creation and operation of Osmosis," Stusser says, "but all the while knowing that someday I would create a garden with the sprit and feeling of a classic Japanese garden."

In 2000, the planting of Osmosis' garden was under way - a meditation garden using blueprints and sketches provided by Robert Ketchel, a renowned English designer and builder of Japanese gardens. The planning of the garden renewed an old acquaintance between Ketchel and Stusser, a friendship begun when they were both apprenticing in Kyoto.

## A parable

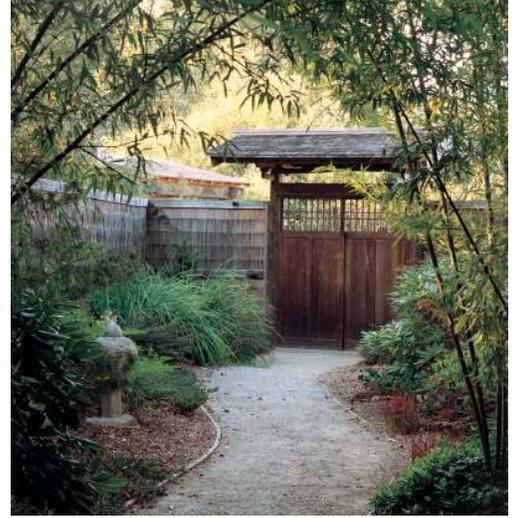
Ketchel built his design around a Zen Buddhist parable about the ox and the ox herder, a metaphor for enlightenment. The parable reveals steps toward learning, with the ox symbolizing the mind and the herder symbolizing the seeker. Large boulders placed in eight stages around the garden perimeter represent the ox and its herder. "Robert provided precise drawings for each boulder, and I spent a year and a half searching local stone yards to find them," Stusser says, with a laugh.



Visitors approach the garden via a woodland path bordering Salmon Creek edged with rhododendron, drifts of Japanese anemone, bamboo forest, nandina, Japanese black pine, to reach an entry gate built by Hiroshi Sakaguch, a Japanese master woodworking craftsman now in Northern California.

Once through the gate, the garden is not immediately revealed. An undulating hedge, a combination of *Pittosporum tenuifolium*, *Prunus caroliniana* and *Myrtus californica*, obstructs its view. On the left, a rusty 1932 Chevy dump truck, immersed in greenery, was allowed to remain as a reminder of the cars, trucks, railroad cars and 400 cubic yards of assorted debris removed from the property's former life as a junkyard.

Stepping stones edged with elfin thyme lead to the Meditation Garden's viewing pavilion built from recycled wood from an old bridge that once crossed Salmon Creek. A large lily pond centers the garden, its shape that of the Chinese character for heart and mind. Across the pond, a rocky outcropping is punctuated by a juniper that has managed to emerge from its stylized dance with Alliger to retain its own idiosyncratic character.



## *Path to enlightenment*

A raked gravel area to the right symbolizes water. Off to one side is where the ox and the herder's path to enlightenment begins.

Stusser is quick to explain that guests to the garden need not be concerned that they must deeply understand the Zen meaning of the garden. "If one comes away with a quieting of the mind, the garden has served its purpose," he says.

To aid in that, installations of comfort and familiarity have been introduced into the classic design. While floor pillows in the pavilion invite traditional positions of meditation, a bench overlooking the pond is surrounded by a cropped, rounded hedge of variegated pittosporum, creating a contemplative spot akin to settling into the embrace of a cozy, overstuffed armchair.

## *Watching clouds*

A small lawn area is included that invites stretching out to watch the clouds sail by. Next to it is an area carpeted in prostrate chamomile where one might like to experience, as Stusser describes it, "a direct connection with aromatherapy."



California native plants, pruned and trained, keep easy company with their classic Japanese neighbors - *Carpenteria californica*, coffee berry, a hedge of *Ribes*, ceanothus, California myrtle, and manzanita, in one instance sheared to drift like a blanket over a boulder.

Grasses, reminiscent of those growing in the nearby coastal dunes, find their place in the more wild and natural part of the garden.

The parable's final stage, "returning to the source," is expressed in a series of waterfalls flowing down from a rocky mound. "Robert spent an inordinate amount of time 'tuning' the waterfall," Stusser says, "positioning the stones and adjusting the stream's levels to achieve exactly the sound he had in mind." The stream passes under a stone bridge to be captured in the stillness of a pond.

"At a traditional spa," Stusser comments, "guests experience their treatments and the next thing they do is jump in their cars and re-enter the busy world. Here, the garden offers an additional element to the spa experience - sanctuary."

**Garden tour:** While the garden is reserved for spa guests' use, a schedule of tours and events is available on Osmosis' website. On July 2, Michael Stusser and tree-pruning expert Michael Alliger will lead a horticultural tour of the meditation garden from 10-11:30 a.m. \$10. 209 Bohemian Highway, Freestone. (707) 823-8231. [www.osmosis.com](http://www.osmosis.com).

Yvonne Michie Horn is a freelance writer. E-mail: [home@sfchronicle.com](mailto:home@sfchronicle.com)