

Garlic country

Gilroy park gains plaudits for Santa Cruz landscape architect

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Sentinel Garden Editor

GILROY — A Santa Cruz landscape architect has been honored for her part in designing Tree Haven Family Park, a theme park under construction in Gilroy, which has captured the 1987 sweepstakes award for being the best landscape project in the state.

The California Landscape Contractors Association announced the award at its recent convention in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. Local landscape architect Karen Aitken designed the project, which was installed by Tamura & Iwanaga landscapers of Morgan Hill.

The winning landscape involves two acres on the side of a man-made lake that is complete with waterfalls and detailed stone work. Included are native trees and drought-tolerant shrubs, numerous flower beds, meandering streams, ponds, walkways, retaining walls made from natural rock, secluded "accent" areas and an observation platform.

The project is phase one of a much larger landscape which, when finished, will include nine international gardens and several picnic areas. Planned are a zoo, restaurant, five amphitheaters, railroad and 1850s-era California town. The amusement park is scheduled for public opening in 1989.

Tree Haven Family Park will also feature more than two dozen of the former Scotts Valley Tree Circus trees. Tree Haven owner Michael Bonfante, who also owns the 21-store Nob Hill grocery chain, saved the amazing twisted trees from possible demolition in 1984. It took more than a year to nurse the neglected trees back to health and move them to the Hecker Pass Highway site.

The once-world famous trees, which have been grafted into everything from hearts and spirals to ladders, will eventually grace the "Enchanted Forest" portion of the park.

Aitken, who has been working on the park's landscape plan off and on for four years, cited the eventual size of the project as a primary reason for it being

named the best landscape project in the state.

The \$30-million, 75-acre amusement park will include those nine international gardens, which are expected to cover six to 10 acres, said Aitken. She has already drawn up preliminary plans for those gardens, which will feature an Egyptian, Moroccan, Greek, Roman, Italian, French, Japanese and English theme.

"A project like this really is a once-in-a-lifetime challenge," said Aitken. "I don't know if what is planted now is so unique, but what is proposed, definitely is."

Irving Tamura, president of landscapers Tamura & Iwanaga, pointed to "attention to detail," as the reason for the award.

"Our client wanted to create something special, and appreciated the time and expense it took us to do the job right," he said. "We didn't cut corners and we used the best plant materials available."

Aitken agreed, noting that it's not often one gets to work on a landscape with a budget literally in the "millions of dollars."

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— Landscape architect Susan Aitken

"We've been able to experiment a lot more with not only the types of plants and planting compositions — playing around with different planting beds — but also paying attention to detail," Aitken said.

The detail can be found in such things as authentic flagstone walkways around the perimeter of the man-made lake.

Even the variety of trees has been carefully studied. There are already a variety of oaks — native oaks, pin oaks and Southern live oaks, as well as a conifer grove with redwoods, firs and cedars.

Sharon McGuire, executive director of the California Land-



The two-acre park features a man-made lake complete with waterfalls and landscaped areas.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Santa Cruz landscape architect Susan Aitken designed the winning project.

scape Contractor's Association, said the Tree Haven project beat out 166 other submittals in this, the 32nd year of the awards program. Most of the entries had previously won local landscape contests, she said.

McGuire said judges spent two weeks traveling the state, visiting every landscape project in order to name winners in the 27 residential and commercial categories.

The association is the nation's oldest and largest organization of licensed landscape and irrigation contractors. Also included in the membership are landscape architects, landscape suppliers, educators, public employees and students.