

GARDEN OF THE GOLDEN DOOR - A Special Twentieth-Year Look at the Most Exclusive Garden in America

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by Peter Jense

HIDDEN WHERE dusky oaks crowd a canyon bottom, where the hills loom blue with ceanothus and the boulders bake in the sunshine, is one of the finest Japanese-style gardens in the United States. But unless you're a guest at the exclusive Golden Door Spa northwest of Escondido, this garden always will remain behind a bejeweled entry gate opening onto a place of solitude, intense care, and peaceful regimen.

The garden turns 20 this year-young in terms of a traditional Japanese garden, but already graceful with age. It saw its first black pine take root with the vision of the Golden Door's founder, Deborah Szekely, when she moved the resort about a mile west to this location. (The Golden Door also operates Rancho La Puerta in Tecate, Mexico, where Deborah and her husband, the late Edmond Szekely, began the American health spa movement in 1940.)

"These gardens get better with age," said Deborah (who pronounces her last name zay-kay) on a recent tour of the grounds. Our feet moved carefully from stone to stone and the koi rose in colorful ribbons to the surface of green pools.

"That's why I went with a Japanese style. The garden becomes irreplaceable as it develops a personality"

In 1973, as the first lines were scratched in the dust of this 177-acre site, where the climate is a perfect blend of diurnal ocean breezes and inland heat, Deborah knew she was in a place that had a definite power. The garden became particularly important to her when she found Zen as a way to overcome the stress of moving the resort to this secluded new site. The original Door, north of Escondido, was usurped by a freeway extension. "My ability to let go is enhanced by gardening," she said, recalling those early



days. "It is mind-blanking, just like sailing is for others. I lived in Tahiti for five years as a child and was raised as a vegetarian. My mother was a great gardener, even when she was battling the Tahiti land crabs that eat everything."

But there was a "reluctance of youth" to return to gardening, according to Deborah, until her chance to plant the Golden Door. **Soon she discovered Takendo Aarii working at Sea World. A landscape architect born and schooled in Japan, A Aarii laid out four courtyards, each a meditative place of rock, water, ornamental trees and shrubs, or raked sand (suna niwa).** Rain chains (ama dara) musically entwine with water as it runs from the roofs in winter. Stone lanterns (ishi doro), several of them hundreds of years old, stand like peaceful sentries throughout the grounds, cool and solid by day, blinking with candlelight at night.

Architect Bob Moser designed the "Honjin Inn" as a series of guest rooms and common-area pavilions, each surrounded by an engawa (a narrow deck/walkway that bridges the gap between indoors and outdoors) and shaded by bird-wing-like tiled roofs.

"I put all my energy into everything we do," said Deborah. "I have an ego. Any style I would have built would have gone out of style-except this. When you build a classic, it gets better with age."

In addition to the Japanese gardens, the Door maintains organic vegetable gardens that provide the guests with much of their daily fare. Their idea is to serve food right out of the garden, which started 54 years ago at Rancho La Puerta. Ingredients can taste exciting exciting that they don't need sauces.

Today, exercise, diet, and spiritual retreat are the well-known hallmarks of the Door, but beneath it all are the gardens.

"People's souls are hungry for beauty ... for nature," said Deborah. "What we do here is on the side of the angels. We have been very fortunate."