



IJ photo/Frankie Frost

On the rocks

This designer sculpts the landscape

By Penny Popken

IJ correspondent

SUZANNE BIAGGI has a fondness for tucking abandoned bowling balls here and there in her rural yard. That's because this artist-cum-designer thinks that sculptural elements are as crucial to good landscaping design as shrubs and trees are.

Of course, \$100,000 landscaping projects can be artistically enhanced with two-ton boulders and custom-forged iron gates and fences, she says. But even humble front yards with whimsically arranged hubcaps suit her. They demonstrate a naive, folk art approach to sculptural landscaping. "It's an individual statement," she says.

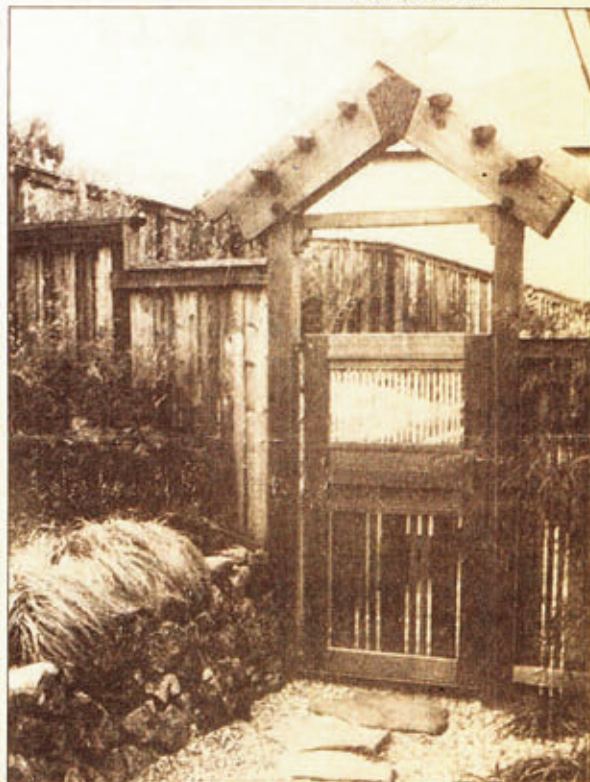
Not far from the bowling balls in her Petaluma garden are several 6-foot basalt columns which Biaggi plans to use as sculptural elements in the garden she has designed for the upcoming San

Francisco Landscape and Garden Show, from April 26 through 30 at Fort Mason Center.

She will hollow out the top of each column to create a bowl and then fill it with water to form what she calls "sun mirrors." Shorter, hollowed-out stones with water dripping into them via bamboo tubes will also be part of her "Zen-Zane" garden.

Boulders with chiseled-out tops are a favorite creation of hers. She has used them frequently in other projects, including a Mill Valley deck where she set a rock at the corner where two benches meet.

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BOULDERS ARE BEAUTIFUL: Suzanne Biaggi (top photo) sits on the deck of a Mill Valley yard where she sculpted a bird bath that fits neatly into the space left by two benches. She also used a large stone at the bottom of a staircase (photo left) and created a sculptural looking gate (photo above).

How to avoid landscaping mistakes



BIAGGI: She trained as a sculptor first; then got into landscape design.

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According to garden designer Suzanne Biaggi of Petaluma, there are several common errors homeowners make in landscaping, including failure to have a plan or a theme for the garden. Here are her suggestions for avoiding pitfalls:

■ Be sure to design an overall plan for your yard. "Many people do it piecemeal," says Biaggi. "They have no plan. And the resulting yard shows it. Instead, you should ask yourself several questions: What's the theme? What's the philosophy, statement or idea that I am trying to project?"

■ If you decide to design your own garden, learn how to draw up plans or, at the very least, "draw" your plans onto the actual site using

spray paint, chalk or lime.

■ Educate yourself about landscape design. Attend garden shows and peruse gardening books and magazines for ideas. Take a landscape design class. Notice landscaping when you're out and about; photograph designs or elements that appeal to you.

■ For instant drama, consider adding large rocks or boulders to your landscape. "They play against the plants," she says.

When installing large rocks in your landscape, be sure to bury them slightly in the soil so they look as though they belong in the yard.

■ Learn about the characteristics of your plants before you put them in the ground. Find out if they have invasive roots or brittle branches. Do they need shade or sun? Remember: There are no bad plants, only bad locations.

See the garden

Suzanne Biaggi will be an exhibitor at the San Francisco Landscape Garden Show that will be held at Fort Mason Center from April 26 through 30.

Her garden there will be called "Zen-Zane, the Paradoxical Garden Party" and will feature her stone sculptures and mirrors.

The garden has been influenced by the colors of Mexico and the contemplative gardens of Japan. "It combines many elements with Zen-like elements," she says.

■ Take time to do things right, and avoid shortcuts or cheap materials. "Do things right or in the long run you'll pay for it."

Sculpture

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The water-filled opening gives the big rock the appearance of a stone-age bird bath, but Biaggi prefers to call such stones "reflection pools." They reflect what's around them." She does concede that birds love them, too.

To help the rocks develop a more weathered, organic look, Biaggi recommends that homeowners spray them with buttermilk or Miracle-Gro to foster the growth of lichen and moss.

Though stones are her passion, Biaggi also gives great thought to the plants she uses in her landscapes. "But I use plants as sculpture," she says.

She eschews the overplanted, wildly colorful English garden look in favor of a less riotous ambiance.

"My plant palette is simple elegance," Biaggi says. "There are not tons of colors. I'll pick two or three

colors and work with those."

She will arrange these plantings along mock river beds lined with stone, rock paths that climb up hill-sides or near quiet ponds with dripping waterfalls. The effect is an almost Japanese sense of tranquility and peacefulness.

In one case in a San Francisco yard, she turned a common enough recreational pool into a virtual rock garden using a combination of tile and stones. "I used 2,500 tons of stone in all," she says.

"We're very pleased with what she did in our yard," says Lorraine Merz, a Novato homeowner for whom Biaggi created a hillside garden of drought tolerant plants and also sculpted one of her "birth baths."

Biaggi came to landscape design by a circuitous route. She trained as an artist and later a sculptor, earning a master's degree in sculpture from San Francisco State. "All my life I never wanted to be anything else," she says.

Still, gardening was a life-long hobby, and when Biaggi decided to take her sculptures outdoors, a new career was born.

"With sculptural landscapes I've found a very good combination," she says.

Biaggi's approach is to do what she calls "site-specific installations," carefully tailoring the design to match the location. "The given is the site," she says. "Are there any borrowed views that I would capitalize on? If you have borrowed views, they become what you bounce off."

Similarly, she works the architectural style of the house and the feel of the neighborhood into her designs.

Though she occasionally does landscape designs only, her preference is to handle the project from start to finish, serving as project manager and consultant. This includes hiring crafts workers and selecting and placing all plants and other sculptural elements. She then returns to the finished garden sever-

al times a year for the first few years to prune trees and shrubs and oversee maintenance.

Biaggi's favorite projects are those where clients have trusted her judgment and allowed her free rein with their yards.

Of course, not everyone can afford a custom designed and installed garden. So Biaggi will be teaching a College of Marin course called "The Garden as an Art Form," May 2 through 30, for those who would like to do their landscaping themselves. Call 485-9305 for more information.

In the class, Biaggi will cover such topics as how to make sculptural statements using constructed, purchased or found objects as well as incorporating the elements of air, water, earth and sun into the garden. Each student will then create his own garden.

For more information on Suzanne Biaggi's Sculptural Landscapes, contact her at 382-1085.