

## Landscape therapy

Monji Landscape Cos. finds a niche in healing gardens.



A hospital healing garden designed by Monji Landscape Cos.

**R**ESearchers say natural settings can lower stress, decrease blood pressure and heart rate and relieve muscle tension. That's the catalyst behind a growing trend toward adding healing gardens to hospital campuses, nursing homes and other health care settings. Monji Landscape Cos., a Bakersfield, Calif.-based firm, has gotten into designing and installing these gardens and has found it to be beneficial—not only financially but in terms of goodwill.

Dan Monji, senior designer and chief executive officer, says that he was moved by the story of a young patient who experienced the first healing garden his company designed at Mercy Hospital in downtown Bakersfield. A nurse told him that a 14-year-old boy who was being treated for terminal cancer watched the evolution of the garden from start to finish from his hospital window.

"When the garden was finished, he was anxious to go there," says Monji. "He would just sit there for almost an hour at a time in his wheelchair. And he ended up spending his last day there—a place to be away from the pain he was experiencing, to be out of his room and mentally escaping it all. I've done a lot of projects in my 37 years but nothing has impacted me that way."

That kind of impact is why Monji and his son Aaron Gundry-Monji, project manager and account representative, continue to design and build these gardens and view them as a growing niche for their company. Gundry-Monji says that the beautifully finished project has almost "sold itself" by helping land the company other jobs. "But it's been the overwhelming response from doctors, visitors, and patients that has really spread the word of how important these healing gardens can be," says Gundry-Monji.

That first healing garden ultimately turned into two separate projects. Then, Mercy Southwest Hospital brought Monji in for a third healing garden. Donations totaling \$300,000 funded the three gardens.

Monji says healing gardens are a smart complement to his business, which has always put its focus on taking an artistic approach.

"This niche gives us a great opportunity as a company that prides itself on being artistic designers," adds his son. "This is about creating living art for people at the hospital. And as a functional purpose it's about easing pain and bringing some peace."

Each job is completely custom, so the project costs differ greatly. It depends on the hospital's budget—which is typically determined by how many donations it receives—as well as the size of the project. "Even at the one campus where we did two separate jobs, those budgets were very different," says Gundry-Monji.

Though the company does see this as being a profitable niche, Gundry-Monji adds that it's much more involved than a standard design/build job.

"With a healing garden, you're dealing with the hospital and often also the fundraisers and the donors, making sure that you're designing something that everyone is happy with," he explains. "There are a lot more players involved and a lot of time before you ever see any money from it. We put a lot of time into the concept and the design alone."

But even if there isn't always a huge profit margin on the hospital project itself, Gundry-Monji says, the additional work and the positive press it's garnered for the company are worth more.

"I can't tell you how many jobs we've gotten from word of mouth because of having designed these healing gardens," he says. "Even just some of our standard residential work has come as a result of people seeing the healing gardens. Local media was there for the unveilings and that was big for us, too."

The author is a freelance writer with seven years of experience covering landscaping.

### » SERVICE SNAPSHOT

**COMPANY:**  
Monji Landscape Cos.

**HEADQUARTERS:**  
Bakersfield, Calif.

**YEAR FOUNDED:** 1953

**SERVICE BREAKDOWN:**  
90 percent design/build;  
10 percent maintenance

**CLIENTELE:** 90 percent residential

#### **WHY HEALING GARDENS?**

"It has grown out of all the years our family has been involved in creating beautiful gardens as our passion," says Dan Monji, chief executive officer. "Artistic designs have always been our specialty. A hospital can be a stressful place, but a beautiful garden can provide you an escape."