

## LAIRE RIVER OAKS WEST

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## CREATING MORE BEAUTY



R. CLAYTON MCKEE: FOR THE CHRONICLE

**GARDEN PROJECTS:** Keiji Asakura was chairman of the 13th annual Houston Japan Festival April 8-9 in the Japanese Gardens at Hermann Park. With Margaret Robinson as his partner in the firm Asakura Robinson Co., he is working on the Museum District's Art of Walking Project and the Texas Medical Center's Holcombe Square Project.

## Asakura focuses on city's aesthetics

■ Tokyo native's love for Houston continues to grow

By ARLENE NISSON LASSIN  
CHRONICLE CORRESPONDENT

KEIJI Asakura, a native of Japan, didn't like what he saw on his first visit to Houston in the early 1980s, but the city has become a place where he has impressed his homeland's reverence for the beauty of nature.

A landscape architect, Asakura got his first taste of Houston in late 1982, while working for a landscape architecture firm based in Newport Beach, Calif., on the master design for Moody Gardens in Galveston.

"When I first came to Houston, I didn't like it," Asakura said. "I was used to

the beauty of California and Japan, and I was just here because our firm had a lot of work here because Houston was booming.

"To me, it was like a prison sentence. But I grew to love Houston."

Born in Tokyo, Asakura first came to the United States in 1968 when he was 15 years old. He was sent by his mother, a widow, to live with his aunt and uncle in Orange County, Calif.

He took his first part-time job in 1970 at a nursery owned by the late Richard Ochiai, a Japanese-American.

Asakura also enrolled in classes at California Polytechnic University in Orange County, Calif., majoring in computer science. He soon discovered his true calling was horticulture and plants.

He received a bachelor of

### KEIJI ASAKURA

■ Age: 52

■ Occupation: Landscape architect

■ Fast facts: He became a commissioner for Keep Houston Beautiful in 1993, and joined the boards of Park People and Scenic Houston in 2000. He also belongs to the Civic Arts Committee, the Japan-American Society of Houston and the Botanic Garden of Houston.

■ Quick quote: "I think Houston's culture is great — it is a dynamic mosaic. I met wonderful people here. It is a community of great people."

science degree in landscape architecture in 1977, and began working for Courtland Paul and Arthur Beggs and Associates in Newport Beach, Calif. that same year.

Professionally, he began accepting landscape architecture projects worldwide in 1983, when he opened the firm Smith Locke Asakura Inc. with two other

landscape architects in Sausalito, Calif.

Asakura opened branches of the firm, renamed SLA Studio Land Inc. in 1987, in Houston in 1983; Costa Mesa, Calif. in 1986; and Tokyo in 1988.

Asakura settled in Houston and married Carrie Cameron in 1991.

They have two daughters,  
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## GARDENS: Asakura working on projects

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Isabelle, now 13, and Sophie, 12.

Asakura was determined to help beautify his newly adopted city. He became a commissioner for Keep Houston Beautiful in 1993, and joined the board of directors of Park People and Scenic Houston in 2000.

He has been a member of the Civic Arts Committee since 2000. He is a board member of the Japan-American Society of Houston since 1998 and of the Botanic Garden of Houston since 2001.

He also served on the city's Municipal Art Commission from 1994-2004.

With Margaret Robinson as his partner in the firm Asakura Robinson Co., 3000 Richmond, Suite 420, Asakura is working on the Museum District's Art of Walking Project and the Medical Center's Holcombe Square Project.

Both projects aim to enhance environments for pedestrians.

He also designs gardens and grounds for large residential communities as well as parks, both large and small.

"I like the aspect of my practice in helping people see the possibilities in how they could improve and enhance the environment, their neighborhoods, streets, parks and their own gardens," Asakura said.

Asakura was the chairman of the 13th annual Houston Japan Festival April 8-9 in the Japanese Gardens at Hermann Park.

A record 25,000 people attended this year's event, which was sponsored by the Japan-American Society of Houston and the city's Parks and Recreation Department.

The festival's mission is to offer Houstonians a sampling of Japanese art and culture.

"The festival is a way to showcase the Japanese cultural heritage," Asakura said. "The Japanese and Americans had a difficult past in the 1940s and we believe there is more to gain from letting people know who we are. The more we know of each other, the less stereotypes, misunderstanding, and conflicts we will have among various groups in our



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**LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT:** Keiji Asakura spends some time in the Japanese Gardens at Hermann Park.

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—KEIJI ASAKURA  
Asakura Robinson Co.

society.

"The result is a deeper understanding of the Japanese culture, and it promotes goodwill between our two countries."

He now resides with a friend, Marjorie Milby, in the Memorial area.

Asakura became a U.S. citizen in 2005, but keeps in touch in his homeland while

conducting business there.

He is excited about developing a new Harris County Precinct 2 park on the city's northeast side.

"What is interesting is that it will have an 'extreme' park, with a skateboard park and a BMX park for bicycle racing," Asakura said. "There will also be more passive areas, such as a running trail."