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**MIXING IT UP AT
BOWL**

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SINGING THE 'DO IT
YOURSELF' SONG
VANILLA ICE
THE LOC & THE MC

BBO
CONTESTS
CULINARY
CHAOS

IN MEMORIAM: GEORGE ROBINSON
ALLEGED PONZI SCHEMER DROPS DEAD
SUNG WICKY DEBARTY • SPENDING TENS OF THOUSANDS
ON A LUXURY BOAT & BACALL • DREAMS OF THE
STARLINE SAYS DRESS CODES ARE SEXIST

VAI Van Atta Associates Inc.

Architect: Susan Van Atta, 235 Palm Avenue, va-la.com

Specialties: Commercial, public, and residential landscape architecture and planning

Notable Projects: The Santa Barbara Bowl, Sheffield Park, Carpinteria Marsh, UCSB's Campus Point, and The Biltmore redesign

Upcoming Projects: The Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History

Susan Van Atta has completed some of the largest public-space landscaping projects in Santa Barbara, but she's still on a mission.

"A lot of us who are landscape architects express amused frustration that, for the most part, people don't have a clear understanding about what a landscape architect is," she said while explaining the rigorous academic studies involved in professional licensure. "They think we are gardeners a lot of the time."



UCSB Campus Point



COURTESY PHOTOS

Van Atta came slowly to her profession. She first graduated from UCSB in the 1970s with an environmental studies degree and helped write the California Coastal Act before moving on to do environmental impact analysis for the County of Santa Barbara.

She changed careers as soon as she became aware of landscape architecture. "I thought, 'What a weird juxtaposition of terms. What does that mean?'" said Van Atta of her initial response to the idea of incorporating architectural design principals into the environmental planning process.

Van Atta then enrolled in three additional years of architectural studies and technical classes — such as structures and urban design — at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo to earn her architectural landscape degree.

She has since taken on many regional projects that focus on revitalizing severely destroyed environmental systems. Her firm's list of large public projects includes restoring an area of the Carpinteria Marsh wetlands that was filled in for condo development, designing the landscape at the Santa Barbara Bowl, and redesigning The Biltmore lawn to reduce water use and add color and texture.

She also redesigned the big concrete reservoir that was Sheffield Park by carefully assessing the topography and natural adjacent lots. "It's starting to feel like it wasn't designed," she says of the organic feel of the layout and native plants. "Although a lot of design went into it, including some historic value."

The Sheffield Park project succeeded in mimicking nature so accurately that a bee expert from UC Berkeley stopped by her office one day to thank her for — unintentionally — creating a bee habitat. It has since been listed it as one of six study sites throughout California to look at how introducing bee-friendly plants can enhance the populations.

Van Atta also returned to her alma mater to create the plan for restoring Lagoon Park. "It was beautiful but really needed some help," she said of UCSB's Campus Point gravel parking lot, which her firm redesigned into a habitat project with wetlands and pools to treat storm water, and bike trails and boardwalks for student adventures. "I was so excited I was able to do that." The project won an American Society of Landscape Honor Award and has become known throughout the world.

One of her firm's upcoming projects will be designing the seven-acre campus of the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History to provide universal access and a permanent butterfly exhibit. "It's such a great setting," said Van Atta of the project, which will also incorporate a tree house, boardwalk, more native plants, and a garden that will attract birds. "It's an opportunity to really take what they do and bring it more into the outdoors."



S.B. Botanic Garden