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Maile Cremation Garden offers unique options



Homelani Memorial Park opened a new development Friday within the Hilo cemetery.

Tucked in the cemetery's mauka corner farthest from Ponahawai Street is the Maile Cremation Garden, touted by Homelani as Hawaii Island's first garden for cremated remains. Wayde Towata, Homelani's general manager, calls the garden, which has been in the works for about a year, "a unique space where people can come, spend some time, reflect and remember their loved ones in a really quiet area."

"Many individuals today are choosing cremation as an alternative to a traditional burial. For this reason, we recognized the need to create a truly special place reserved exclusively for cremated remains," Towata said.

The 1,500-square-foot garden was designed with input from Clarence Lau, a feng shui master. Its entryway is a rectangular granite passage with a three-tiered, semi-pyramidal overhead, flanked by twin columbaria with similar roofs that house what Homelani calls bamboo niches.

"That kind of gives it that entrance point to the garden and kind of sets it apart from everything else in the park," said Mark Gilmore, regional vice president for NorthStar Memorial Group, Homelani's parent company. "And you've got that hedge along the site, as well. It gives it, I think, a very warm, comforting feeling. Eventually, when the construction's complete, we'll build a meandering walkway through there, as well."

One side of the garden is bordered by a hedge, while a banyan tree provides shade at the end farthest from the entrance. There are a number of different structures within the garden, all made of granite. Pointing to a granite birdbath with a sculpted bird on its dish, Towata said, "These are what we call pedestals."

In addition, there are pedestals with praying hands, a marlin, turtles and butterflies. There are also granite benches, pedestal benches, markers with angled tops known as posts, individual markers topped by a petroglyph-like honu carving and basic ground-level rectangular urn burial markers called tablets.

"There are a lot of ways you can memorialize someone when it comes to cremated remains," Towata said. "We've got all different shapes and sizes for all different kinds of budgets and all kinds of different tastes and preferences."

Altogether, the garden is designed to hold 288 sets of cremated remains, Towata said. Prices, which include memorial internment, capsule and engraving, perpetual maintenance and taxes, range from \$3,373.95 for a 6"-by-4" single post to \$55,119.76 for a pedestal bench. Those prices don't include cremation.

"The cremation consumer, we've found, just wants something that's different," Gilmore said.

"They don't necessarily know exactly what that is unless they see it. That's why we have such diverse offerings out there — the cremation benches, the pedestals, etc. And essentially, we can craft that to be whatever somebody wants it to be. What are they passionate about? We've had gardening pedestals; we've even done one in the shape of a dirt bike before, because this guy loved motocross. And for a family there on the Big Island, we're creating a 6-foot-tall angel pedestal that can be placed in their home. It can be whatever they want it to be; it really allows for personalization.

"We've seen kind of a rise in cremation with Baby Boomers and the choices they've been making have been a little bit more unconventional, if you will, than the traditional, what we think about being in a cemetery. So what we've found throughout the years is if we can create these little sections within our cemeteries that have more of a nature garden or a park kind of feel within them — where it's its own little destination within the park — it really resonates with families. And the Maile Cremation Garden at Homelani is no exception to that. It just has some unique offerings that are untraditional, if you will. We've worked with the landscape architect and design team on a number of these gardens here in Hawaii and on the mainland, as well."

Gilmore said properties with cremation gardens include Valley of the Temples on Oahu and Maui Memorial Park, both NorthStar properties.

"At Valley of the Temples, one of the most popular items that we've had are cremation posts. We have them at Homelani, as well. They're the ones with the slanted tops where you engrave the names and the urns go inside. But on Maui, we have a trellis niche that goes across the sidewalk. We have them here at Valley of the Temples, as well, but at Maui Memorial Park, they're more popular. I don't know why. Is it the setting? It's the same product, but in different settings, it just resonates with people differently.

"Each community is unique, and in Hawaii, each island is unique. In putting in this first phase here, we're really trying to find out what resonates with the Hilo community, what families like there. So when we do our next development, we can tailor it to what our communities are telling us about what they like."

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