

# ARROYO

FINE LIVING IN THE GREATER PASADENA AREA  
MARCH 2012

## The Urban Garden

WINDSTORM  
HORTICULTURE

A CHEF'S  
GARDEN

LANDSCAPING  
FOR WILDLIFE

# Wild

Wynne Wilson created a wildlife refuge in the colorful garden around her Altadena home.

BY BRENDA REES

THE DESTRUCTIVE AUGUST FIRES OF 2009 brought smoggy days, closed forest roads and plumes of dark purple clouds rising above the Angeles National Forest. It also displaced countless animals suddenly left without nests, burrows or holes to call home.

Altadena resident Wynne Wilson was not surprised to see enormous flocks of birds arriving at her recently planted backyard garden for a cleansing dip in her newly paved creek bed. Critters of all shapes and sizes joined the post-fire influx to set up temporary shelters among the coffeeberry bushes, edible currant shrubs and 900 other plant types that punctuate Wilson's three-quarter-acre landscape. "We were happy to welcome the birds and all the other escapees," says Wilson, a landscape designer, photographer and former long-time Art Center College of Design instructor. "I've always wanted my own garden to be a wildlife refuge, a place I could connect with the natural world."

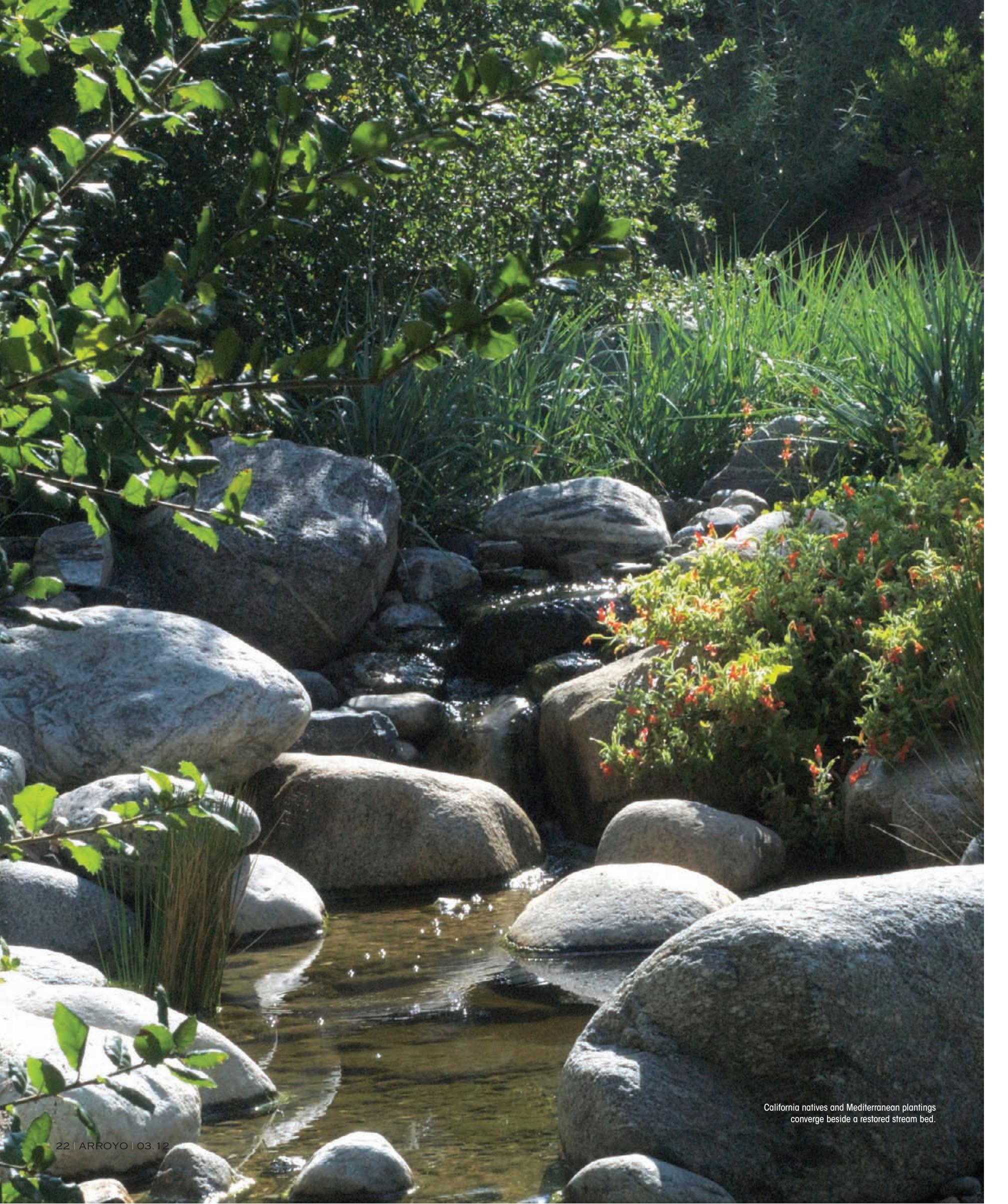
Beneath a splendid vista of the rising San Gabriel Mountains, Wilson's backyard ecosystem sculpts its own majestic scene of California natives mingled with Mediterranean plantings ideal for the Southern California climate. Part arid chaparral, part shady woodlands, the expanse is more than just a fine example of an economical water-wise garden (with the garden redo, her monthly water bill went from \$1,000 per month to a mere \$100 to \$150). This arty smart garden contains several large areas, including a sun-baked salvia and California lilac garden with a stone seating circle, and an updated pool and a spa with custom hand-painted Malibu tiles, guarded by huge deodar cedars and privacy hedges of California lilacs. Veritable rainbows of floral color abound, including more than 3,000 plantings of coral bells (delicate but hardy plants that proliferate wildly), to Wilson's delight. "I've also

PHOTOS: Wynne Wilson/Terra Design

# About Gardening



A Swallowtail butterfly investigates California native wild rose foliage.



California natives and Mediterranean plantings converge beside a restored stream bed.

got so many varieties of penstemons that they are cross-hybridizing into unique specimens,” she says.

The garden is open for educational tours, and Wilson and her Terra Design Company host classes and informal gatherings of eco-minded gardeners. (She’s also well connected with the Theodore Payne Foundation; her garden has been showcased on TPF’s annual garden tour for the past two years.) Former students and staff at Art Center, artists, musicians and garden clients are drawn together to discuss a topic that’s an evergreen in Arroyoland — using California natives and drought-tolerant plants to create wildlife habitats as well as beautiful landscapes. “It is ironic how [California natives] have been utilized in European gardens for over a century and are now finding new popularity here,” she says.

Wilson planted her garden in the spring of 2009, beginning by removing her typical suburban lawn, scraggly azaleas and other water-hungry plants. “I hand dug it up. We removed about 95 percent of the grass. It was a long process, but the best way to do [it],” she says of forgoing chemicals or large black plastic sheets that suffocate and kill beneficial insects (like native bees) and underground critters while they’re killing grass. Wilson then followed guidelines set by the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) for designing a residential wildlife refuge. She discovered it wasn’t difficult to combine those directives with her ambition to craft a garden that would be attractive in any season. The trick: Use plants with long bloom times, interesting leaf structures and sculptural qualities.

The NWF specifies four main criteria to certify a garden as a wildlife refuge: The site must provide food and water sources, protective covering and safe places for wildlife to raise their young. In return, the organization participants (who may be involved in residential, school or community projects) receive an actual certificate, a free one-year free NWF membership and the opportunity to install an official plaque in their habitats. But, says NWF spokeswoman Roxanne Nersesian Paul, “I think the real benefits are twofold — with so much of their habitat disappearing, wildlife has a better chance to survive when we provide space for them. For people, the chance to view the wildlife up-close and share with their children is an end in itself.” Some 146,000 locations — with California’s in the lead — have been certified since the program was launched almost 40 years ago.

For Wilson, getting the certification was “more a personal accomplishment and a way of giving something back...Waking up to the sights and sounds of birds, butterflies, bees and water is a wonderful way to begin one’s day.” Wilson found that supplying the program-mandated food and water was easy enough. She installed appropriate bushes, trees and flowers (e.g., manzanitas, lavenders, poppies, sages) which soon became a wildlife smorgasbord of tempting berries, nec-



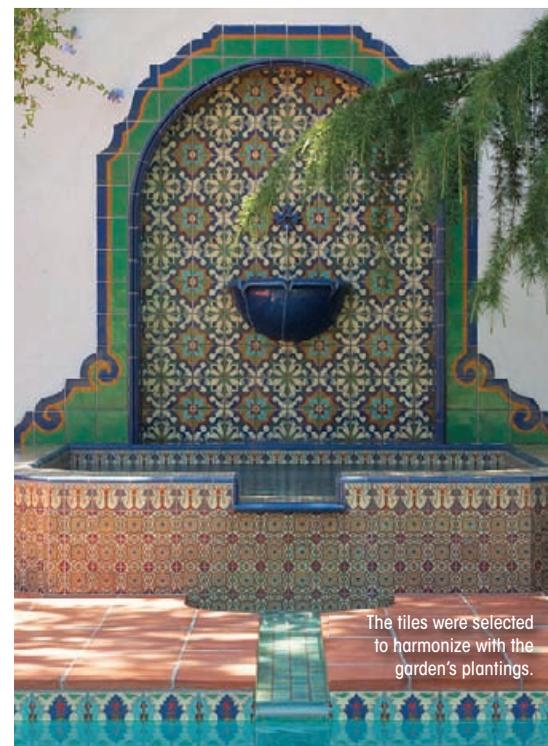
A mix of California natives creates a tapestry of color around the fountain.

tar, leaves and fruit. For water, she constructed a 50-foot-long recirculating man-made stream complete with 30 tons of boulders. Creating hiding spots and wildlife nurseries involved a little more thought when it came to placement. “Shrubs that are intermingled to allow animals to escape... plants with spiny branches and/or thorns are just the thing,” says Wilson, who used wild roses, native grasses and toyon and gooseberry bushes. Scattered stones in the stream bed also provide nesting opportunities for lizards and insects. Large trees, like pines, offer great seclusion spots for raccoons, squirrels and birds.

“The ability to invite nature in is so easy,” says Wilson about the ever-changing critter clientele. “Every winter, we are a stopover for migrating cedar waxwings. I love it when they come. We had an incredible migration of painted lady butterflies that flocked to the native [California lilac] by the thousands one year.”

Walk her footpaths to glimpse Western fence lizards basking on enormous boulders. Nearby, monarch butterflies feast on California milkweed plants tucked beneath centuries-old California live oaks. Aerobic dragonflies dart over bubbling waters. At night, little brown bats and great horned owls perch high in the deodar trees, which offer ideal vantage points for their evening hunts. “When you create this kind of ecosystem, everything takes care of itself pretty much,” says Wilson. Sure, she’ll do monthly deep waterings, pruning and weeding but, on the whole, the garden runs on its own with no pesticides or fertilizers. Ladybugs eat aphids, possums eat the snails, hawks go after the small rodents. Wilson’s essential philosophy is to stand back: “Just let nature alone and it will be fine,” she says. ||||

Landscape designer Wynne Wilson can be reached at [wynnewilson@charter.net](mailto:wynnewilson@charter.net) or (626) 296-3773. For information about the National Wildlife Federation’s Certified Wildlife Habitat® program, visit [nwf.org/gardenforwildlife](http://nwf.org/gardenforwildlife) or call (800) 822-9919.



The tiles were selected to harmonize with the garden’s plantings.



A native *Penstemon centranthifolius*, a.k.a. scarlet bugler, attracts a hummingbird.