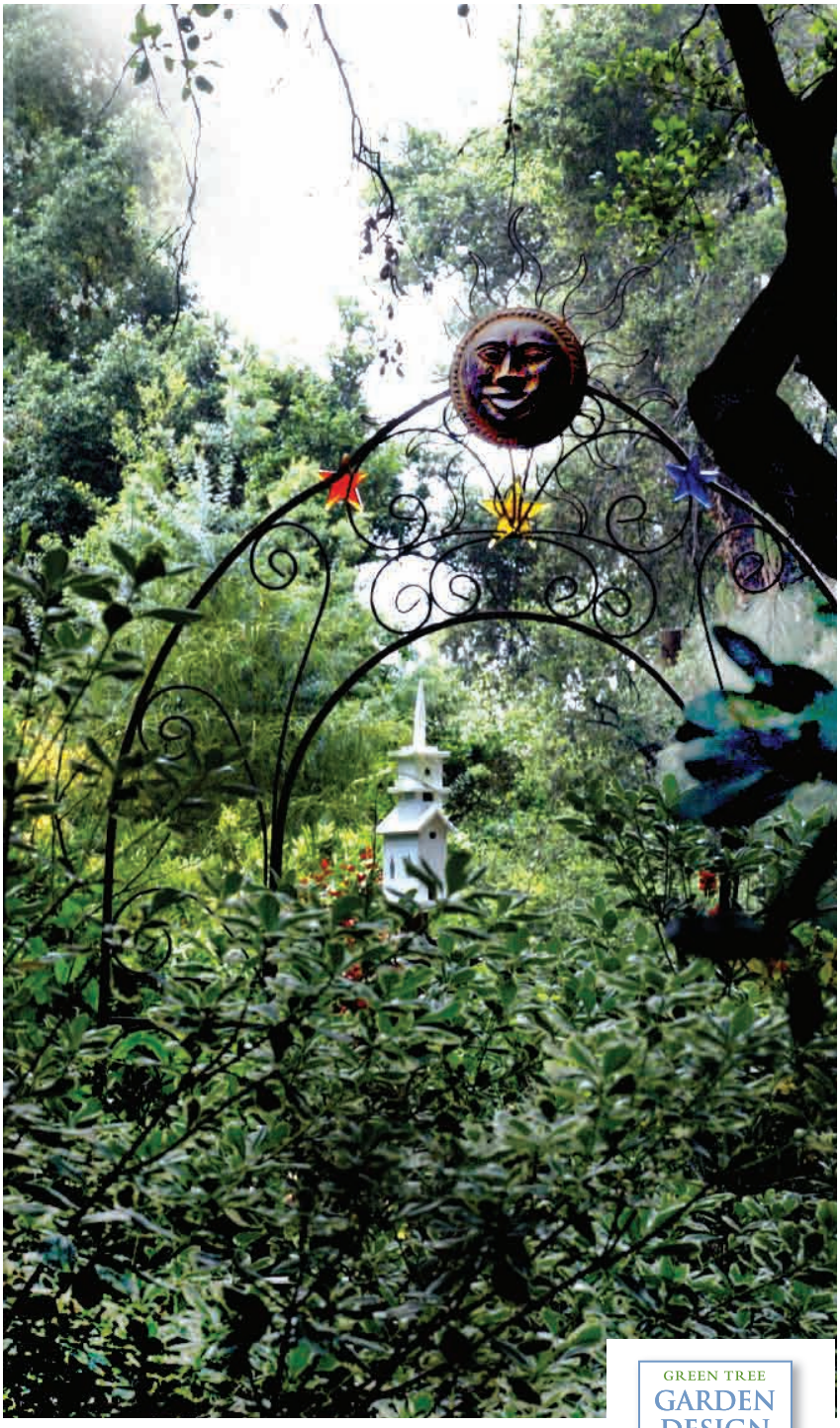
NORTH COUNTY TIMES

‘I try to design the garden ... as if it were a canvas.’

— **GARY WALKER,** contest-winning Escondido gardener



Photos by STEVE MARCOTTE / FOR THE NORTH COUNTY TIMES

Decorative birdhouses, left, punctuate the landscape of the Escondido garden owned by Gary and Mary Walker. Above, a rose in full bloom is surrounded by buds waiting to blossom. The property has at least 120 rose bushes.

GREEN TREE GARDEN DESIGN

Lots of sweat equity turns ‘Jurassic Park’ acreage into winning ‘Eden’

Grade-A garden

PATTY MCCORMAC
FOR THE NORTH COUNTY TIMES

Neighbors used to call this patch of Escondido acreage "Jurassic Park," because it was such an unsightly, overgrown jungle. Five years later, it was among the winners of the Garden of the Year Contest in 2002 by San Diego Home and Lifestyles magazine.

Gary Walker still laughs and shakes his head at the memory of all the work he had to do to coax his garden to this point.

"This was the fixer-upper yard of all fixer-upper yards," he said. It had fallen trees, overgrown vines and abandoned vehicles.

On a recent spring day, walking into this garden was like walking into a painting by Monet. Indeed, Walker modeled part of his own plot after Monet's famous garden at Giverny, France.

"It's a classic riparian woodland garden with European nuances," he said.

From his color palette, he has chosen soft pastels such as pinks, lavenders, blues, salmon and a scattering of reds, yellows and greens of all shades.

Walker's mother was French. They lived in Europe for a time, where Walker learned to appreciate European art.

"I try to design the garden as if I were 1,000 feet up and as if it were a canvas," he said.

He said the foundation of the garden is its native trees, such as the coastal live oak, willow and sycamore.

A creek runs through the property year-round, and Walker has dammed it slightly along its course to provide reflective ponds and the sounds of a babbling brook to please the visitor's ear.

Regular inhabitants — raccoons, squirrels and countless birds — provide a heartbeat in the garden.

Gary Walker, an arborist by profession, explains how he has been grooming this wisteria for almost a year. "I'm a wound-up nature monkey," he says, explaining his dedication to the 2¼-acre Escondido spread.

"It's all God-given, this native habitation," Walker said. He does help out by providing dozens of birdhouses and feeders, though.

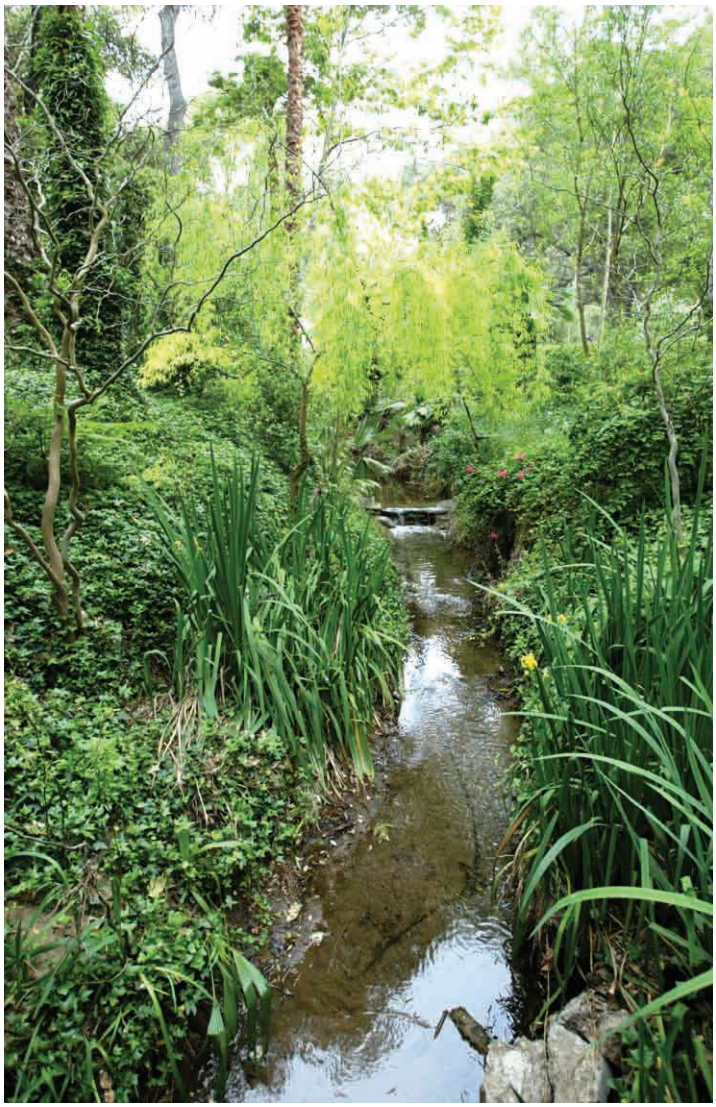
The 2 1/4-acre garden, which the Walkers have named Villa Floreal, is really six separate gardens, or "rooms," each with its own personality. Each room has its own door in the form of an arbor or trellis. Each room also has a bench so that a visitor can pause to enjoy the garden or simply meditate.

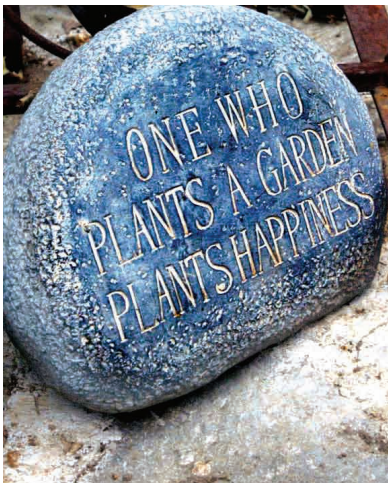
The meadow, the garden's sunniest part, bursts with the color of at least 120 rose bushes and different types of flowering perennials. Son Trevor, 10, suggested and helped design paths through it, Walker said.

The Rain Forest "room" is planted with dozens of varieties of ferns, bamboo, shade-flowering plants and exotic garden art. Walker has placed water misters in the towering oaks, sycamores and palms to provide a moist, cool sanctuary.

"In the summer when the sun is baking, the Rain Forest is an air-conditioned oasis," he said. "This area leads, via one of four bridges over the year-round creek, to our 'Squirrel Island,' so named by our 10-year-old son because the squirrels like to live there."

This area is planted with Japanese maples





Far left, native plants thrive along the creek running through the Walker property. Above, in the meadow section of the award-winning Escondido garden, recent rains have helped flowers bloom in a full palette of colors. Near left, the inscription on this garden rock explains the motivation for Gary Walker's four years of work to turn what his neighbors used to call 'Jurassic Park' into the paradise they call it today.

Photos by STEVE MARCOTTE
FOR THE NORTH COUNTY TIMES

GRADE-A

Escondido property goes from 'Jurassic Park' to Eden

and different types of mallows, rockroses and geraniums.

As he walks though the garden with a visitor, he stops here and there to pull weeds.

"If you don't get them now, each plant will turn into 15 new ones next spring," he said

Walker calls the garden "visual Valium" and admits it is his passion. "Our passion is what we put our blood, sweat and tears into," he said.

He works in the garden about seven to 10 hours a week, usually about an hour in the morning and evening. Once in a while, he pays a helper to assist him.

"They work under my direction, because it is a complicated garden," he said. "If they pull a weed that is not a weed, it's a waste of my time and money."

On the side of a hill is the Rock Garden. Here Walker has planted trailing vincas, ivy, geraniums and ferns. Behind this area and around the back of the property is what he calls "the ring of fire," which are trees that turn color in the fall.

He compares his involvement in the garden to conducting a symphony. He arranges for each of the areas to light up with color at a different time of year, just as a conductor brings up the string or woodwind section during a concert.

He can't explain why he is so involved in this huge hobby. "I'm a wound-up nature monkey, I don't know," he said.

In his day job, Walker is an arborist and he helps design gardens for others, he said. His wife, Mary, is a graphic artist and "not a gardener," he said.

The Walkers' property is next to the 55-acre Felicita Park and only a about a mile away from the Westfield Shoppingtown North County mall. Yet the ambiance of the area is of somewhere far away — perhaps close to Eden.

NORTH
san diego county magazine

beautiful Gardens of North County

by Evelyn Weidner

Hidden near Escondido's Felicita Park, Gary Walker has planted a wild sanctuary that only an arborist by profession could have created. His prize specimens are located throughout his property, along winding paths, through his grotto of trees and out into wide open spaces.

GREEN TREE
GARDEN
DESIGN

Harmonizing Nature, Art & Science