

A Pond to Write Home About

Recreational ecosystem build in Northern California mountains

by **Steve Sandalis,**
Mystic Water Gardens

As a design-build company based in Southern California, with the state being so large, we often get opportunities to travel up north to do large-scale projects. This time, we were presented the opportunity to do a project nestled in the foothills of Wine Country, close to Lake Tahoe.

Auspicious Beginnings

During my first phone meeting with the client, we had an immediate connection over the mountains and the outdoors. Upon hearing the description of his 100-acre property, with mature ponderosa pines and incense cedars, I was quite excited to take a trip and see the location firsthand.

While researching the area and planning my visit, I found a beautiful campground located on the Cosumnes River only miles from the client's property, which sealed the deal for me. It made me feel like all the

pieces were falling into place.

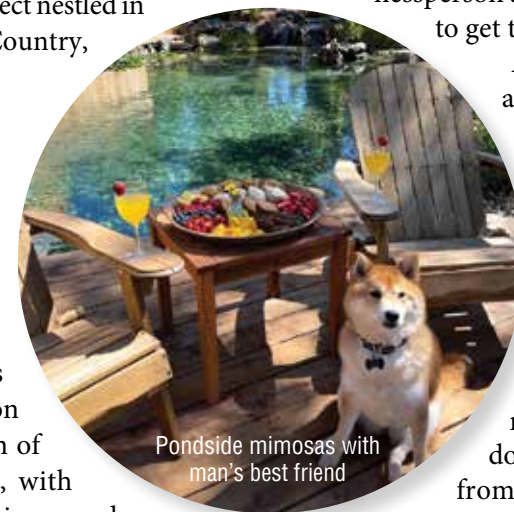
During my first meeting with the client, we walked the site, and my creative juices were flowing as we discussed the perfect setting for a recreational pond. It's not often that you meet a client with whom you totally connect, who has the most perfect setting for a rec pond, and who is a successful businessperson and knows what it takes to get the job done.

As I was leaving the area full of joy for what I knew I could create, a gorgeous black bear ran across the front of my truck. I knew I would be back!

Striking Gold

Some challenges naturally arise when doing a project five hours from home — specifically, the basic logistics of gathering supplies, equipment and additional manpower.

Thirty miles into my journey back to Los Angeles, I started wondering where and how I was going to get the hundreds of tons of rock needed for the project. As I pulled over to get some coffee and fuel up my rig,



Pondside mimosas with man's best friend



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like a sign from Poseidon himself, I saw a sign that said, “Rocks for Sale.” As I shook my head in disbelief, I called the phone number immediately and spoke to a very friendly local who informed me he could get me any rock size and shape that I need from the Cosumnes River — the same place I was camping!

Out of curiosity, I asked him how he was able to get material from the Cosumnes River. He told me the most fascinating story about his wife’s grandfather, who owned 2,000 acres of the original gold mine 200 years ago. While most of the gold miners who arrived there were Americans, the gold rush attracted thousands from Latin America, Europe, Australia and China. The Cosumnes River was — and still is — an important, gold-bearing river!

A Local Lift

In another stroke of luck, the gentleman who supplied all the beautiful natural rock had a lot of heavy equipment, so he was able to dig out and grade the rec pond for me, which greatly helped with my logistics problem!

As a designer, I appreciate beautiful work. I noticed that a company I follow on social media was based in the same town where the project was going to be constructed. As the project started to move along, I contacted Verne Pershing, the owner of The Art of Gardening and fellow Certified Aquascape Contractor, and asked him if he wanted to collaborate.

Having a local contractor to help turned out

Because the pond location was sloped (top), we had to construct a very large berm. We used approximately 200 tons of rocks (bottom) and boulders. Some of the rocks were up to 7,000 pounds each.



Renderings (top left) help to show the vision. With any water feature (bottom left), not only is a waterfall a focal point, but it also helps to aerate and move the pond, keeping the water clean and clear. Unrolling a 50-by-100, 2,000-pound Firestone EPDM liner (above) is quite a task!

to be a great asset and alleviated a lot of the research requirement. Pershing was able to help me get some key supplies and was gracious enough make his crew available to help with construction.

Rec Pond Specs

The pond itself was approximately 2,500 square feet (80 by 40 feet) and 6 feet deep. When I designed the rec pond, I wanted it to be set against the beautiful, rustic house to create the look of a lakefront property. After talking with the client about his lifestyle and family, I knew the rec pond needed to be deep, because it would be impossible for him not to want to launch himself off his deck into the cool, refreshing water. Another

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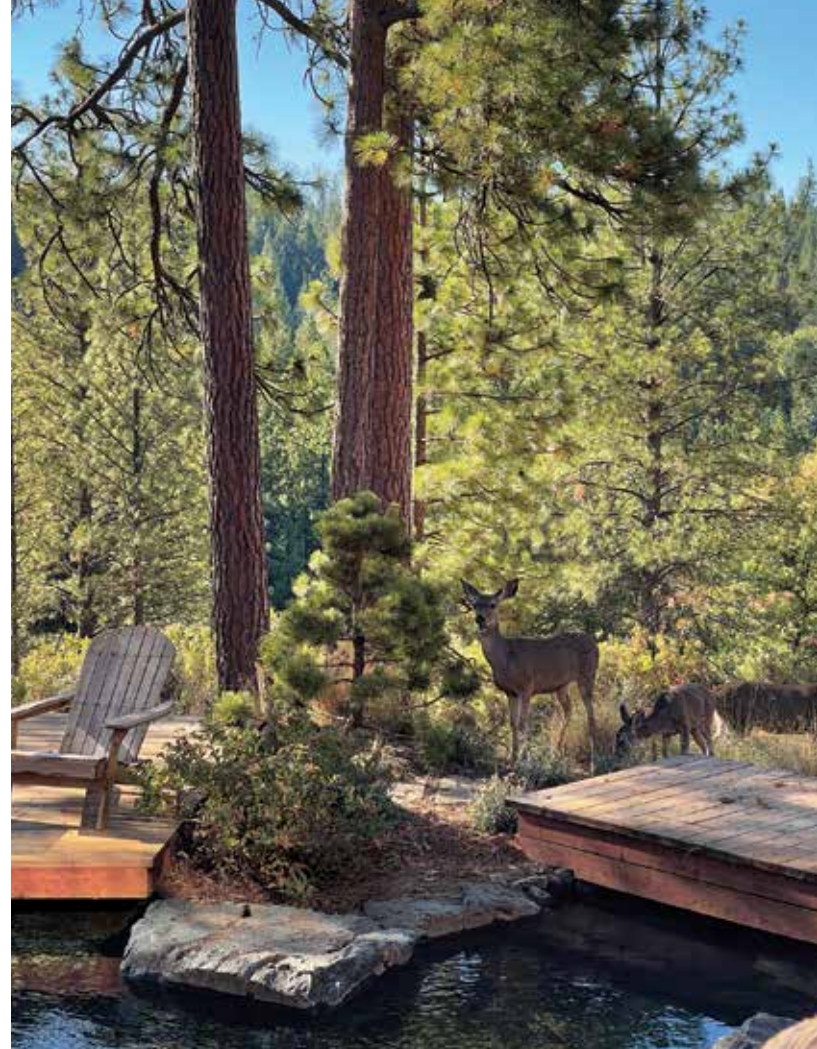
To keep the water clean and clear, I constructed a large wetlands bog filter with a 100-foot stream and multiple

waterfalls. To cater to the homeowner’s lifestyle, I designed a natural swimming hole about the size of a hot tub, where the client can sit and relax on a hot day and cool off. The last design element to help with the low-maintenance aspect was the construction of a skim cove and skimmer to help collect leaves and debris that might fall into the rec pond.

In the design of natural-ecosystem recreational ponds, it is always important for the feature to look like it has always been there. This is best achieved with the use of native plants around the feature to help it blend in.


Picture Perfect

It is always a bittersweet moment



A rec pond can be enjoyed throughout the four seasons (opposite page). The client's favorite times to view his pond are sunrise and sunset.

when we complete an amazing project, especially when it's hours away from our home, because we never know when we might get the opportunity to visit again. It brings the Mystic Water Gardens team a lot of satisfaction that not only do we create beautiful environments for our clients, but we also create habitats for the native wildlife, which over the years is slowly losing its domain.

To our happiness, weeks after the feature was installed, our client started sending us amazing photos of the natural wildlife drinking out of the bog, stream and pond. Building in the incredible weather of Southern California gives us an opportunity to build and design year-round. One small drawback is that we typically do not get to experience our water features in the change of the four seasons. Once again, to our surprise, our amazing client continues to update us with beautiful photos of the pond in all its winter glory. 

About the Author

Steve Sandalis has owned and operated Mystic Water Gardens for 17 years.



He is a Master Certified Aquascape Contractor.

Steve, an avid outdoorsman, gets a lot of his inspiration from many of the national parks that he has visited across the

United States and his travels to many far-off islands. What's special about Mystic Water Gardens is their ability to design and build small courtyard water features and large lakes and waterfalls alike. Located in Los Angeles, Steve has built features for some of the biggest names in Hollywood. His design approach centers on innovation and eco-friendliness. The Mystic Water Gardens team aren't just landscapers — they create environments.

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