



PLANTS

What trees survived in our terrible fires? And why didn't they burn?



(Patrick Hruby / Los Angeles Times)

By Jeanette Marantos
Staff Writer

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Welcome to February, plant fans; may this month be a respite from L.A.'s hellish, heartbreaking start to 2025.

To all who lost family, friends, pets, homes and jobs in the fires, my colleagues and I send our deepest condolences and love. If only our good wishes could make all this horror go away. We hope that providing factual information, investigations and guides will help our communities heal.

Below you'll find a list of upcoming plant events, but first I want to discuss one of the few happy surprises from the fires that consumed much of Altadena, Pacific Palisades and parts of Malibu — the many massive trees that survived.



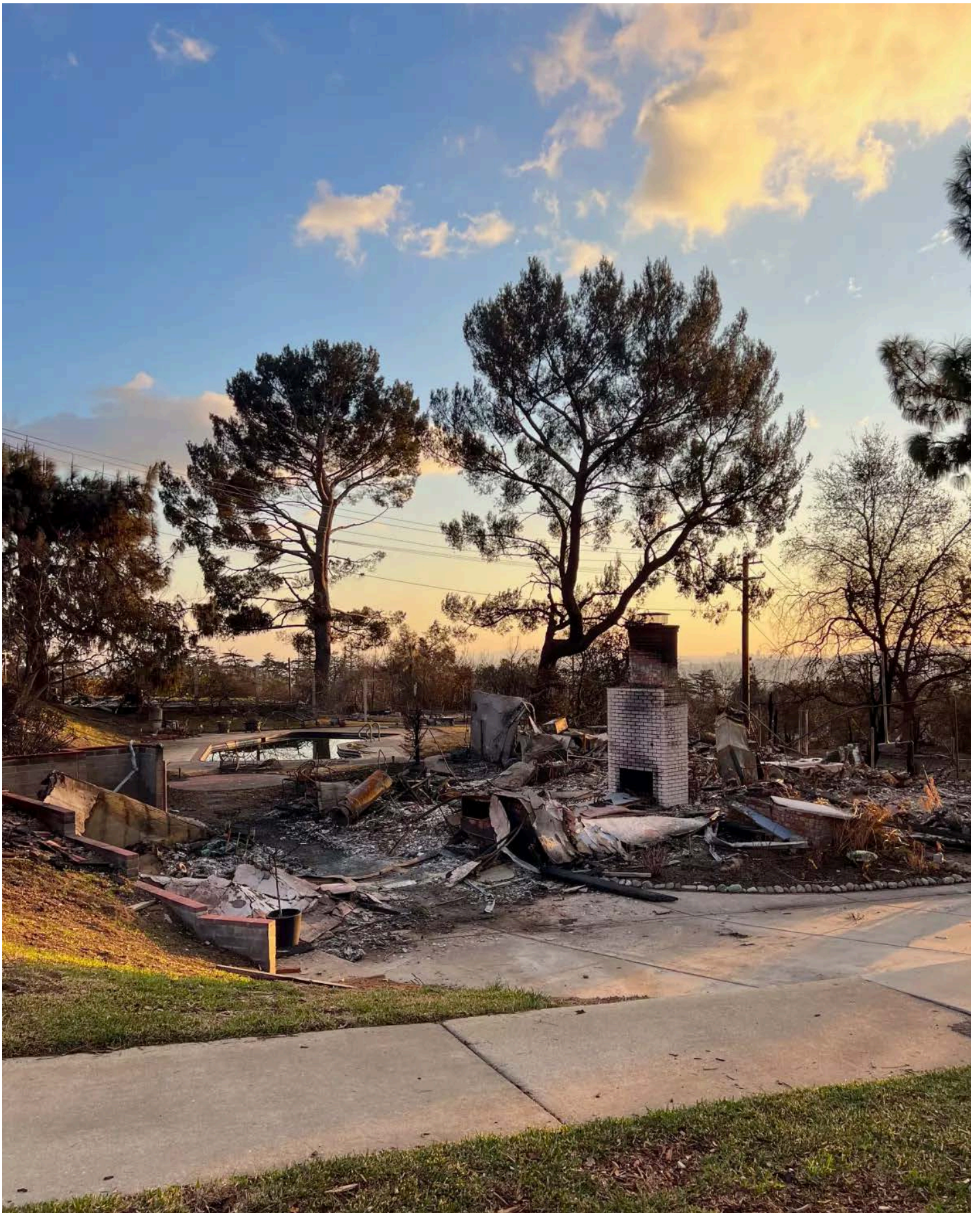
An aerial view of green trees surrounding the ashy remains of homes burned in the Eaton fire. (Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times)

Predictably, social media has offered a few unsupported (and quite puzzling) conspiracy theories that somehow, someone or *something* caused the houses to burn for some sinister purpose, while saving the trees.

[Cal Fire](#) recently posted a more reasoned explanation [on Instagram](#) that the fires we saw in Altadena and Pacific Palisades weren't wildfires, which spread from plant to plant, but "conflagrations" — intense fires propelled by wind that spread from structure to structure, such as from a trellis to a house to a neighbor's fence to the neighbor's home.

Certain trees survived, according to Cal Fire, because they have a natural adaptation to withstand fire, such as thick bark, a shape that sheds embers and higher moisture content than the structures that caught fire. "While trees may still be singed, they are often less flammable than structures," according to the post.

You can certainly see that in aerial photos of Altadena after the Eaton fire. "All you see is the green trees and the gray foundations of the houses that burned," said famed rose breeder Tom Carruth. "It was remarkable to me that those trees are still standing there."



A home on Loma Alta Drive in Altadena burned in the Eaton fire without any apparent harm to the surrounding conifers. (Jeanette Marantos / Los Angeles Times)

Carruth and his husband, Rob Krueger, lost their East Altadena Drive home of 37 years in the Eaton fire that killed 17 people and destroyed more than 9,400 structures. They evacuated the night the fire began on Jan. 7, with their iPads, medications and little else. They returned the next morning to get Rob's car, just in time to see the roof collapse on their 102-year-old home, which was ablaze.

But about 15 feet from the house, their towering deodar cedar was entirely unfazed. If you turn your back to the now ruined house and just look at the front yard, it seems idyllic: a bench under the cedar tree, flower beds dotted with greenery, roses waiting to be pruned and a scattering of violet sky queen iris in full bloom.

Survivors of the fire recall fist-sized embers driven by the fierce Santa Ana winds pummeling homes and yards. "Seeing the deodar completely untouched ... that surprised me the most," said Carruth, a former rose breeder for Weeks Roses who is now curator of the rose garden at [the Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens](#).



Tom Carruth's deodar cedar and other plants stand unscathed by the Eaton fire that destroyed his East Altadena Drive home, and the homes of his neighbors. (Jeanette Marantos / Los Angeles Times)

Deodar cedars are evergreen conifers native to the Himalayas, in areas between Afghanistan and Tibet, but they also grow happily around many parts of Altadena. The biggest collection is on Santa Rosa Avenue, where about 135 deodar cedars stretch for nearly a mile, supporting the community's 104-year-old holiday lighting tradition known as [Christmas Tree Lane.](#)



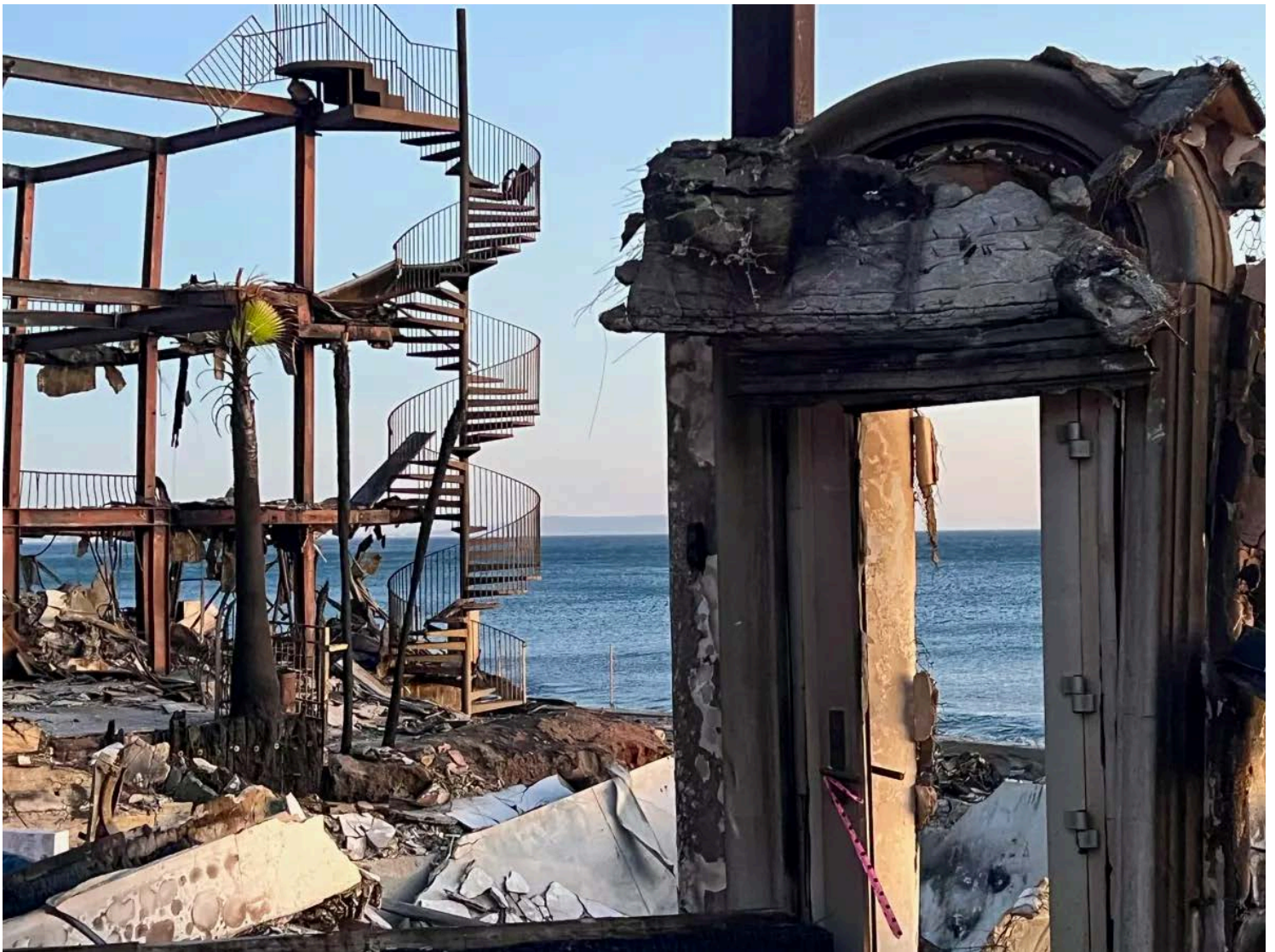


One of the towering 135 deodar cedars on Santa Rosa Avenue left relatively unscathed by the Eaton fire, despite a shower of embers that burned several nearby homes on Colman Street. (Jeanette Marantos / Los Angeles Times)

Longtime Santa Rosa Avenue resident Tony Ward described [watching the fire rain giant embers](#) down from the foothills the night of Jan. 7. “They would strike the trees [the deodar cedars] and burst into little sparklers,” he said. “Most of the embers went out, but this was something we’d never experienced before.”

Many other large conifers like pines survived the fires too. In fact, many of the biggest survivors appear to be evergreens such as conifers and native oak trees, said fire safety educator and landscape architect [Doug Kent](#), who recently visited the burn areas in Altadena.

“The oaks did an incredible job; they really lived up to their mythology as fire catchers,” Kent said. “And the camphors, which are not native, did a great job too. They’re a popular evergreen tree with a big, open canopy, like an umbrella with reddish green leaves.”



A lone green frond is the only color on a charred palm tree next to the ashy gray ruins of burned homes along Las Flores Beach in Malibu. (Jeanette Marantos / Los Angeles Times)

Kent, who regularly gives talks about [creating fire resistant landscapes](#), believes the large trees served as wind breaks that buffered the hurricane-force Santa Ana winds that reportedly gusted over 80 mph. “Wind behaves like water does; if you put an object in front of water, you get an eddy effect where it swirls around the object. If you put a wall up, like a tree, the firebrands [embers] are stopped and they fall to the ground.”

This is why it’s important to ensure you don’t have branches overhanging your roof or pushing against your home even when you plant so-called “fire catchers” like oaks, Kent said. “You don’t want those firebrands to drop on your roof or against your house.”

Kent thinks it also helped that the surviving trees, such as the deodar cedars, were likely more irrigated than trees in the wild, so had a higher moisture content.

What about trees that didn't fare well in the fire or, worse, spread the flames?



An Altadena house with a mostly xeriscape landscape still burned in the Eaton fire, while nearby conifers and palms survived. (Jeanette Marantos / Los Angeles Times)

That's harder to determine. Native shrubs such as toyon, lemonade berry and manzanita burned to stumps as the fire swept through Eaton Canyon, said Cristhian Mace, natural areas biologist for Los Angeles County Parks and Recreation, "but that doesn't mean the roots are killed. Those plants evolved in fire habitats and they will come back, I guarantee you."

Mace was thrilled, however, by how well the oaks and sycamores fared around the Eaton Canyon Nature Center, which burned to the ground. "Every mature sycamore I saw [in the canyon] had some dark scarring on their bases, but that was it," she said. And almost all of the oaks came through just a little singed, "so both trees proved their heartiness."

In my very unscientific survey, I saw plenty of palm trees with blackened trunks and crispified tops along with tall, skinny and highly flammable Italian cypress and arborvitae that looked like charred poles.

But in fairness, I also saw many eucalyptus, palms and cypress that seemed unscathed, growing just feet away from the smoldering remains of houses.



Sometimes fires burn so hot nothing survives, as seen with the charred remains of this tree on Pacific Coast Highway at Carbon Canyon Road in Malibu after the Palisades fire. (Jeanette Marantos / Los Angeles Times)

Sometimes it's just the luck of the draw — or the direction of the wind, said Altadena native [Rebecca Latta](#), a biologist and certified arborist. “When the fire’s hot enough, it doesn’t matter what you do, but I’m concerned that people are vilifying the trees,” Latta said. “Houses are concentrated fuel sources, and what we saw here is that the trees got burned by the houses next to them burning, not vice versa.”

Latta's biggest concern now is that well-meaning people may start cutting down singed oaks and conifers without realizing they'll likely survive. "There's so much angst in the community right now about all the people coming in and doing stuff that might not be carefully considered," she said. "Those trees are part of Altadena's identity, and we shouldn't be hasty about removing them unless they're clearly gone."

I'm sure researchers will be studying the long-term effects of the fires on those trees and shrubs, but the best — and hardest — advice the experts have now is to wait and see what comes back.

In the meantime, especially as our drought persists, make sure the trees around your home stay hydrated. Every couple of weeks, turn your hose to a trickle and water under your trees for a few hours, to ensure the water sinks deep.

And pray for more rain.

Upcoming events

Throughout February

Seniors Free Month at the San Diego Zoo Safari Park and botanic collection is offering free admission to visitors 65 or older during the month of February.

sdzsafaripark.org

Feb. 1

Santa Monica Mountains Fund Native Plant Propagation Workshop, 1 to 4 p.m. at the Rancho Sierra Vista Nursery in Newbury Park. Learn how to grow native plants from cuttings and seeds, and take home some of what you plant. The workshop is free but registration is required. samofund.org

Feb. 6

Irrigation Basics for Native Plants, a Walk and Talk with Erik Blank, horticulture educator for the [Theodore Payne Foundation](https://theodorepaynefoundation.org), from 2 to 3:30 p.m. at the

foundation's demonstration garden in Sun Valley. Register online, \$28.52 (\$23.18 for members). [eventbrite.com](https://www.eventbrite.com)

Feb. 8, 22

Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy Native Plant Sale, 10:30 a.m. to noon at the George F. Canyon Nature Center in Rolling Hills Estates on Feb. 8 and the White Point Nature Education Center in San Pedro on Feb. 22. Admission is free. [pvplc.org](https://www.pvplc.org)



A home on Glenrose Avenue in Altadena is fully engulfed in flames from the wind-driven Eaton fire. (Gina Ferazzi / Los Angeles Times)

Feb. 8

Walnut Valley Water District Fire-Resistant Landscaping Workshop, 10 a.m. at the Diamond Bar Center in Diamond Bar, presented by landscape architect and environmental educator [Douglas Kent](https://www.douglas-kent.com), author of "[Firescaping.](https://www.firescaping.com)" Admission is free but preregistration is required. [acwa.com](https://www.acwa.com)

My Patio Re-Wild, a Potting Workshop for Two, 10 a.m. at the Tree of Life Nursery in San Juan Capistrano. Learn how to plan, pot and maintain a container garden with native plants. The \$10-per-person fee includes instruction, soil and decorative landscape materials; plants and pottery are sold separately. Preregister to receive a 10% discount on plants for the workshop. californianativeplants.com

Trail Crew Intro Training with the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy, 9 a.m. to noon at Fred Hesse Jr. Community Park in Rancho Palos Verdes. Learn about trail building and maintenance, erosion control, building rock walls and other related skills. Participants must be 18 or older, but no experience is required. The class is free. pvplc.volunteerhub.com

12th Annual Santa Barbara Botanic Garden Conservation Symposium, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Santa Barbara County Education Auditorium. This year's theme is "Seeds of Change: Conservation through Diversity." In-person attendance is \$40 for the general public; \$15 for students and garden members. Watching the virtual livestream is free. Register online. sbbotanicgarden.org

Feb. 9, 12, 15, 18 or 26

The Master Gardeners of Orange County present Grow it Now: Warm Season Vegetables, to teach how to select and grow warm-season vegetables in your garden. These free classes are offered at five locations and times: Feb. 9 from 2 to 3 p.m. at the Anaheim Public Library, Feb. 12 from 10 to 11 a.m. at the Fullerton Community Center, Feb. 15 from 2 to 3 p.m. at the Laguna Beach Public Library, Feb. 18 from 9:30 to 10:30 a.m. in the Westminster Senior Center and Feb. 26 from 6 to 7 p.m. in the Yorba Linda Public Library. mgorange.ucanr.edu

Feb. 9

Los Angeles Mycological Society 41st Annual Wild Mushroom Fair, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Los Angeles County Arboretum in Arcadia. The event includes a keynote address by L.A. artist and society member Sam Shoemaker, a mushroom walk, cooking demo and hands-on cultivating workshop. Admission is free with \$15 ticket to the

Arboretum (\$11 seniors 62+ and students with ID, \$5 children 5 through 12, free to children 4 and under and Arboretum members). arboretum.org

Feb. 14, 15

Adult Night Hike: Bawdy Botany, 7:30 to 9 p.m. at the Los Angeles County Arboretum. Discover the botany of love and lust, such as the potions that got ancient Romans in the mood. Participants must be 18 or older. Advance registration required. \$25 (\$20 for members). arboretum.org

Feb. 15, March 1 and 15

Climate Gardening 101, a monthlong course offered by TreePeople to examine how cultivated urban landscapes can impact climate adaptation. The course includes three in-person sessions from 9 a.m. to noon at the TreePeople headquarters at Coldwater Canyon Park in Beverly Hills, along with four virtual lessons. The cost is \$20; register online. treepeople.org

Feb. 20

Propagating California Native Plants from Seed with Ella Andersson, a certified horticulturist and chief botanical technician for the [Theodore Payne Foundation](http://TheodorePayneFoundation.org). Participants receive seed kits with reusable flats, pots and plug trays, plus 10 species of cool season native plant seed. Register online, \$92.55 (\$81.88 members). eventbrite.com



A native, burgundy red Pacific Coast iris with an apricot-colored center, known as Red Planet Iris, bred at Matilija Nursery in Moorpark. (Bob Sussman)

Feb. 21, 22, 27

Hollywood at the Arboretum Walking Tour, 2 to 3:30 p.m. on Feb. 21, 22 and 27, with a fourth tour from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. on Feb. 22 at the Los Angeles County Arboretum. See the locations and hear the stories about how the Arboretum has been used as a backdrop for films, television shows, commercials and videos since the 1930s. The tour is free with advance registration and \$15 admission to the Arboretum (\$11 seniors 62+ and students with ID, \$5 children 5 through 12, free to children 4 and under and Arboretum members). arboretum.com

Feb. 22

California Native Plant Propagation Workshop, 10 to 11 a.m. at the Tree of Life Nursery in San Juan Capistrano. Admission is free but advance registration is required. californianativeplants.com

Santa Ana Winds and our Ecosystem, a [Theodore Payne Foundation](#) class taught by naturalist William Selby, author of “[The California Sky Watcher](#)” from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Register online, \$39.19 (\$33.85 for members). eventbrite.com

Feb. 25, March 4 & 11

Matilija Bob’s Gardening with Native Plants, a three-session class offered by Conejo Valley Adult Education from 5:45 to 7:15 p.m each night in Thousand Oaks. The class is taught by Bob Sussman, owner of Matilija Nursery in Moorpark. Register online for the \$65 course. cvae.asapconnected.com

Feb. 28 to April 6

Tomatomania! returns to Southern California for its 25th year. The pop-up vendor returns with more than 100 different varieties of tomatoes and peppers starting at its first location at [Roger’s Gardens](#) nursery in Corona del Mar from Feb. 28 to March 9, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily. [Tomatomania](#) is visiting 10 sites around the region this spring; their schedule is listed online. tomatomania.com

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What we’re reading

What should you do if your house didn’t burn, but you still have [potentially toxic ash that blew into your garden or yard?](#) What about the veggies in your garden, and the ash clinging to your plants? I talked to some experts to learn how to safely

remove ash in yards outside of the burn areas. And yes, you can safely eat your unscorched veggies after a good scrub.



Jim, left, and Tom Nuccio, owners of Nuccio's Nurseries, posed for this photo in mid-December, just a few weeks before the Eaton fire destroyed the rustic wood storage building and profusely blooming Dazzler camellia behind them, along with a house and several other outbuildings. Most of their plants, however, survived the fire. (Jeanette Marantos / Los Angeles Times)

Fires, fires and more fires ... it's been hard to stop reading the reams of compelling, heartrending stories about the Palisades and Eaton fires that have killed 29 people, and destroyed more than 16,000 homes and other structures. You can see all of our coverage in our special [fires](#) section.

Not all the fire news is sad. [Christmas Tree Lane's](#) 135 deodar cedars survived the blaze, as did most of the camellias and azaleas at [Nuccio's Nurseries](#), although the nearly 90-year-old nursery faced a new problem — no water to keep its plants alive. An update: They finally got enough water to soak their plants, and co-owner Jim Nuccio believes most will survive. He is open Monday, Tuesday, Friday and Saturday from 8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.,

but suggests that customers wait until later in February to visit, because the many utility trucks and work crews make it hard to drive through the area now.



Jeanette Marantos

Jeanette Marantos is a Features reporter focused primarily on plants, gardening and Southern California's changing landscapes for the Los Angeles Times. She also writes the monthly [L.A. Times Plants](#) newsletter, which includes a calendar of upcoming plant-related events. Email calendar submissions or plant-related story ideas to jeanette.marantos@latimes.com for consideration.