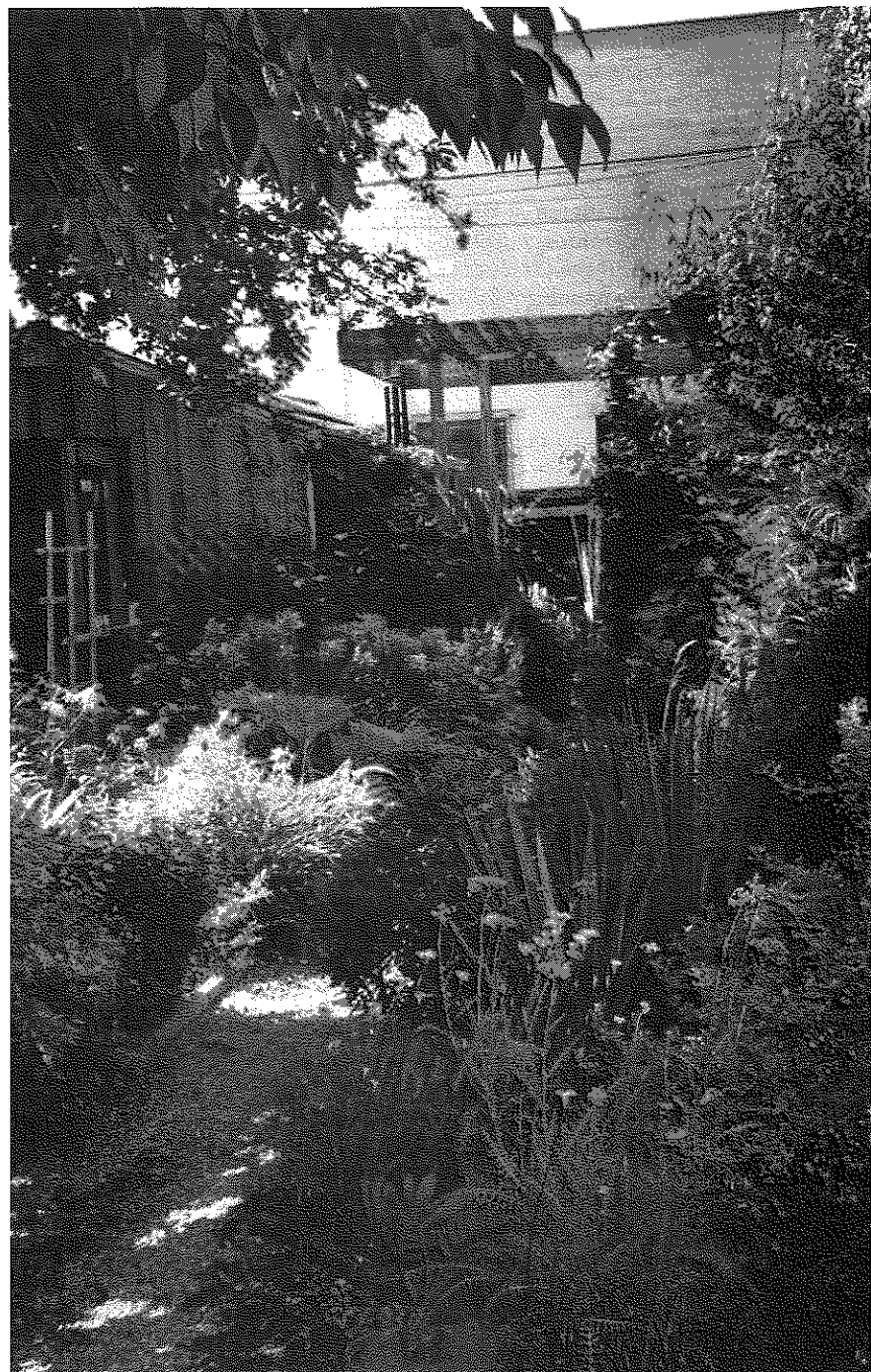
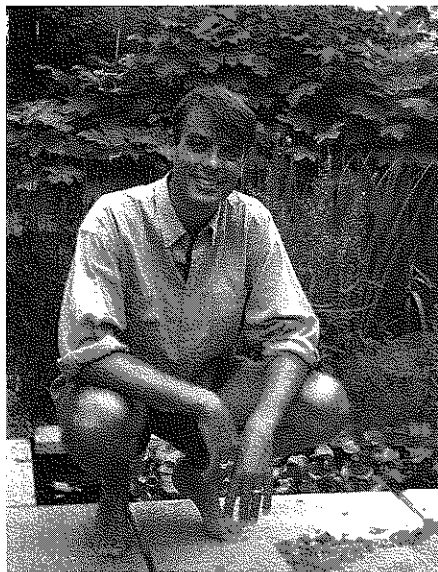


# Alex Wilson



photos: Alex's garden by Rosemary Donegan, Alex by Stephen Andrews

**Obituary: Alex Wilson**  
by Jody Berland, Rosemary Donegan, Peter Fitting

Alexander Wilson died on October 26, 1993, after a lengthy illness. He was 40. How to communicate the devastation of that illness, that death? No one loved life more generously, or gave more of the gifts of beauty, spirit, and language. His death was an enormous loss. Yet he left us each feeling thankful for what he gave us. Those who knew and loved him will struggle with that poignant equation for as long as we live with his memory, for as long as we live.

Alex moved to Toronto from the U.S. in 1976, and lived here until his death. He was a founding editor of *Border/Lines*, and during the early years, from 1983 when we first met to plan the magazine, to 1988 when he departed for India, he was the editorial collective's heart and lungs. He brought balance, grace and intelligence to its deliberations, while ensuring the magazine's practical survival. He read and edited manuscripts, wrote letters to neglected correspondents, prepared agendas for collective meetings, found and negotiated with printers, held meetings in his garage-studio-kitchen-bedroom-living room on de Grassi Street (where he also prepared wonderful meals), and otherwise cared for the diverse material needs of production. His particular talent for giving at both levels, the intellectual and the practical, taught us something about their deeper connections, with all their worldly and spiritual truths. Alex was a curious, open-minded, yet deeply committed thinker, determined to create a hospitable space for critical exploration and a diversity of voices. He was also a nurturer with a practical mind and practical hands, a sensitive gardener of words and pages as well as an artist of speaking landscapes.

Alex came to Canada to attend the University of Toronto as a graduate student in English. He quickly found a lively community of graduate students and professors, including Peter Fitting and Fred Jameson, who remained his lifelong friends. The University proved resistant to Alex's research plans, which centered on issues of sexuality and representation, and Alex left before completing his PhD. Alex then became the editor of the "Our Image" section of *Body Politics*, Toronto's Gay Weekly. Here Alex gathered together and inspired some important new voices: Sue Golding, Andy Fabo, Leo Casey, Martha Fleming and others worked with Alex in the late 1970s. They hoped to expand the field of gay identity politics to include cultural issues; they translated Foucault for *BP* readers, and more generally tried to broaden the mandate of gay activism to encompass representation and image politics. Other *BP* editors saw this interest in sex and representation, and in theory and everyday life, as antithetical to their human-rights oriented political agenda, and amidst controversy and debate, Alex was removed from his position in 1981. Subsequently Alex worked briefly with *Fuse*, co-editing a special issue in 1983 with Jody Berland and Rosemary Donegan. Soon after, with Alex, we joined Ioan Davies, Alan O'Connor and others to create *Border/Lines*, con-

ceived as a vehicle for moving across a number of powerful barriers: between culture and politics; between the academy and a vibrant non-academic urban intelligentsia; between critical commitment and a diversity of languages and voices.

In 1982 Alex began a brief tenure teaching part-time with the Cultural Studies Programme at Trent University. Alex was not in search of an academic career. By this time, his income came from gardening. But this experience was the catalyst for a new unification of Alex's concerns: ecology, culture, the socially constructed languages of nature, local restoration. He began to write and to create radio programs about cities and bicycles, about tourism and cars (*B/L* 11, 1989), and about the qualities and consequences of urban life. Alex loved nature, but he also loved cities; he loved looking at and thinking about architecture, parks, collective gardens, Toronto's ravines, all built landscapes coexisting with the hum of city life. His creative energies were turned to the cultivation of more harmonious people-nature relationships in urban contexts. He and his life and landscaping partner, Stephen Andrews, (later joined by a third partner, Kim Delaney) formed Garrison Creek Planting Co., and created many lovely and ecologically sophisticated gardens. His widely praised book, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez*, was published in 1991. Two one-hour radio programs on restoration were broadcast in the 1992 *CBC Ideas* series. In these works Alex elaborated his understanding of human-nature relationships. He did not believe in a remote ideal of pristine, untouched nature, but rather advocated a more integrated and activist human-ecological community defined by ecological diversity and respect for local growth—

values that also shaped his journalism and cultural activism.

Watching Alex work in a garden was (as many have commented) like reading his sentences. He worked with physical grace, deft skill, intuitive balance, and a deep appreciation for the beauty of the word and the world. Each had its own pace, its own rhythms and textures, smells and tastes, its own magic. His generosity, spiritual warmth and openness to pleasure infused his materials and touched everyone he knew. He faced a difficult death—before AIDS took his life, it took away his gardens and his language—with singular grace, calm and compassion. In his last months there was only the love of his friends and caretakers. That was, and remains, without end.

*"For all the promise restoration holds out, it's not a cure-all. ... Yet, I've come to think that the value of restoration lies in the chance it gives people to do hands-on work with natural systems and to learn about them. As we ponder the possibilities for life on this planet in the next century, restoration points the way toward a new natural philosophy, one that celebrates our relationship with the rest of nature. Its rituals -- collecting seed, tending plants, bringing life back to urban waterways -- hold out the possibility of what Aldo Leopold called 'a mutually beneficial relationship with the landscape,' a relationship that integrates technology, ecology and human livelihood in an expanded notion of community, a new idea of home."*

Alex Wilson  
"Restoring the Earth"  
*CBC Ideas*, March 1992.