



Gardening Insights

January 2009

Colorful plants for winter

My brother, on a visit from Minneapolis, was surprised to hear that our desert plants do little growing in the winter when the weather seems surprisingly mild to a northerner. But any desert rat and gardener knows that summer is when our plants are cranking and that winter is not the best time to plant-watch here.

Desert dormancy shouldn't preclude us having colorful gardens though - with careful planning and plant selection, it's possible to create attractive combinations that glow in the lovely rich light of our cool season. There are evergreen trees, dramatic accent plants, winter flowering shrubs, and native wildflowers to choose from. These living elements, when teamed with vividly colored walls and containers, sculpture, and dramatic "hardscapes" can rival a garden in mid-summer splendor. Well almost...

I have a winter gardener's plant list on my website at the address below. This list of my favorites includes the native species shown above. Chuparosa's red flowers incite hummingbird riots and taste like sweet cucumber. The flowers are great in salads if you don't feel guilty stealing from the hummers. Rhyolite bush (top left) is a remarkably tough shrub that thrives in rocky sites while Blackfoot daisy, below it, tolerates many soil types and is a sprawling groundcover. Bush dalea dons purple flowers that bees adore and is a must for pollinator gardens. Another of my favorites is our local Fishhook barrel cactus. All winter long it sports a crown of brilliant yellow pineapple-like fruits that rival any flowers for their appeal. Massing the cacti magnifies the effect. I have three dozen of them in my front yard and I'd love more! Here's to winter color!

www.gardeninginsights.com/html/articles/snowbirdlandscaping.htm



No System, No Problem

Drip irrigation has long been touted as a easy and efficient solution to landscape watering. I beg to differ. To function correctly, a system requires monthly re-timing, frequent inspection, and complete replacement in about a decade. Few system owners maintain them in top operating condition and problems can go unnoticed for months because the components are buried and out of sight. I contend that many desert homeowners would be better off with a temporary system or, best, NO irrigation system at all.

Here are some tips for landscaping without a drip system:

- Think Local! Use native plants that grow in dry conditions (but not the types that grow in washes). Southern Arizona has an amazing array of species for landscaping that are beautiful, water thrifty, and bird and wildlife friendly. Go hiking for inspiration on designing with our locals.
- Use passive water harvesting to make the most of rainfall. Berms and swales direct water where it's needed and allow it to soak the soil. Swales need not be deep to be effective; a couple inches will do in most cases.
- Use "graywater" from showers and clothes washing if possible. Just be careful to use the right soaps.
- Start your plants by direct seeding. Plants that germinate and grow in place often fare better than container grown transplants. They usually grow very quickly too. More on that in a future issue of this newsletter.
- Use mulches and/or gravel to cover the soil surface; they reduce evaporation, cool the soil and trap nutrients that filter down to the roots of plants. Natural leaf litter is the best, so leave it in place if you can.
- Hand-water transplants as needed. I like to use a 5 gallon bucket with a pin hole in the side. I fill the bucket, set it next to a plant, and let it drain slowly. To prevent runaway buckets, put a rock in the bottom if it's windy.
- Contact Desert Survivors Nursery, The Watershed Management Group, The AZ Native Plant Society, Tohono Chul Park, and Tucson Cactus and Succulent Society. All can be found by Googling. Or call me for a consult!



Plant of the Month:

Calibanus hookeri

Calibanus hookeri has no common name, but it does have many uses in desert landscapes. Narrow blue leaves gush like a fountain from its craggy spherical base and make it an ideal plant for tall containers. It's also spectacular in masses around pools, walkways, and other spaces where a grassy evergreen effect is desired.

Calibanus exhibits few problems with frost or drought in Tucson even though its origins are farther south in Mexico. Rabbits and pocket gophers might attack it, however. Root ball cages control gopher damage but bunnies are difficult. Fenced yard? Rabbit stew?

Deep soakings just once or twice a month will satisfy Calibanus' water needs, but it might do well without supplemental irrigation if grown in a space with passive water harvesting.

Maintenance is minimal. Just yank off the dead leaves as needed and apply a slow release fertilizer yearly.

Searching for landscape plants:

Plant enthusiasts often like seeing favorite species in their native habitats. I'm one of them, and here are a couple places I go.

Molino Basin (Catalina Mtns):

This stop on the road to Mt. Lemmon features beargrass, fairy duster, apache plant, penstemons, coral bean, and many others. Park in the lot and cross over the road to the trail. Follow it or the streambed east and you'll find lots of good stuff. It's especially beautiful in spring and after the monsoon.

Sweetwater Trail (Tucson Mtns):

Drive to the west end of Camino del Cerro and park. Go west and take the left trail when you come to the "T". You'll soon come to a wash. Instead of following the trail, go west up the wash and you'll find fun stuff like desert honeysuckle, flat top buckwheat, limberbush, and desert ferns. It's an easy hike and the scenery, plants, and geology are great.

In the next issue:

- Limberbush: Tough, flexible, easy-care and puce!
- Drylands Institute: Documenting the planet's biodiversity and bringing it to life in blazing colors
- Reader's query: How can I keep my patio interesting, colorful, and SIMPLE year-round?
- Landscape idea: Classy, grassy, and blue - an all monocot garden

Here's an opportunity for you!

Watershed Management Group (WMG), a Tucson non-profit, seeks individuals to assist with rainwater harvesting workshops, earthworks, international program development, fundraising, and organizational tasks. WMG is a smart, energetic, and committed group of people. Come to an open house and learn more and check them out on the web - www.watershedmg.org.

Saturday, Jan. 24th from 4 - 5pm
(Tucson Ward 1 Council Office, 940 W. Alameda St.)

Thursday, Feb. 5th from 7 - 8pm
(Tucson Ward 3 Council Office, 1510 E. Grant Rd.)

RSVP: 520-396-3266; or catlow@watershedmg.org.



GARDENING INSIGHTS - LANDSCAPE DESIGN AND CONSULTING

Our LEAF* design philosophy and practices include:

- * Local plants, materials, artists, and architecture
- * Eco-friendly ways to save water, avoid chemicals, and encourage wildlife
- * Artistic, inspiring, and creative uses of plants, sculpture, and other elements
- * Functional design for spaces that are easy to live in and easy to maintain

Call or email for a consult, a comprehensive design, or an on-site design

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