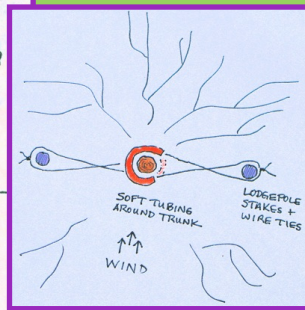




*Staking for Support*



*Staking for Stability*

# Gardening Insights

January 2010

## *Staking young trees*

Stakes are a part of almost any commercial or public tree planting project, so it's not unreasonable for people to assume they're a required element. They're not. Stakes are an added expense and an eyesore that can be avoided with careful selection of small trees at the nursery. Sometimes it is unavoidable, however, so there are also tips below for effective staking.

### **Avoid staking:**

1. Buy trees without "nursery stakes" which are usually bamboo poles tied tightly to the trunk with plastic tape. These can hinder trunk development and are for nursery convenience only. They must be removed when trees are planted in the ground.
2. If a tree is nursery staked, ask the salesperson if it can be removed before purchase. If the tree "swoons" when the stake is removed, look for a sturdier specimen.
3. Avoid overgrown trees. Small trees are typically sold in 5 gallon containers and should be about 3' to 6' tall. If they're much larger and/or have large roots coming out the bottom of the pot, they've been in the pots too long.
4. Select trees that have small branches near the base. These low branchlets will improve the growth rate and strength of the lower trunk. They might be unsightly, but they should be left in place for at least one year.

### **Effective staking:**

1. When support is necessary, stake with two stout poles and wire ties. Thread the wire ties through soft hose or other tubing where they contact the trunk. Then cut the stakes as low as possible to minimize branch rubbing.
2. For stabilizing newly planted trees, stake low on the trunk and from three points as shown above. This method is used for trees that have adequate trunk strength, but where their rootballs might shift or pull out of the soil in wet, windy conditions.
3. Inspect staked trees monthly and adjust the ties as necessary. Never keep a tree staked for more than one year.



## Controlling packrats

Perhaps I started badly with the title above. I'm not sure if controlling packrats is possible, but there are ways to modify YOUR behavior to minimize run-ins with these incredibly cute but horribly destructive little rodents.

Packrats are formally called white-throated woodrats (*Neotoma albigula*) and are native to the southwest of the US. They are solitary creatures and nest in protected spaces that they clutter with twigs, pieces of cactus, and other material they scavenge from nearby. They are nocturnal and generally feed on plant material like mesquite pods and cactus pads. Females produce several young during the warm season and, at about 2 months of age, the babies head out on their own to find suitable nesting sites. Packrats prefer "previously owned" nests in overhanging landscape plants like rosemary, prickly pear, or desert spoon, and woodpiles or stacked boxes in a carport or garage. Even worse, they might choose the engine compartment of a car or truck and cause very expensive damage to the wiring. In natural areas, their numbers are controlled by hawks, owls, snakes, coyotes, bobcats, and other predators. Nearer to urban areas where predator numbers are lower, packrat populations can grow large and they become troublesome.

There are many "cures" for packrat control based on anecdotal evidence. But the ideas below are from Mr. Packrat, Kris Brown. He's worked with the rats for years and knows what works and what doesn't.

1. Trap existing rats, then destroy their nest sites and minimize re-entry by trimming up plants that provide cover like collapsed prickly pear cacti, dense groundcovers, and clumped agaves.
2. Ensure that garages, sheds and other structures are well sealed. Packrats can squeeze through tiny openings.
3. Store firewood and other bulky items off the ground far enough that a predator can catch a rat underneath.
4. Park in an open space. If you do park in a carport, open the hood of your car and keep the carport lit with yellow bug lights (to avoid large numbers of insects).
5. Feed your hummingbirds, but do not put out bird seed or quail blocks. Instead, plant native shrubs that attract, feed, and shelter birds.

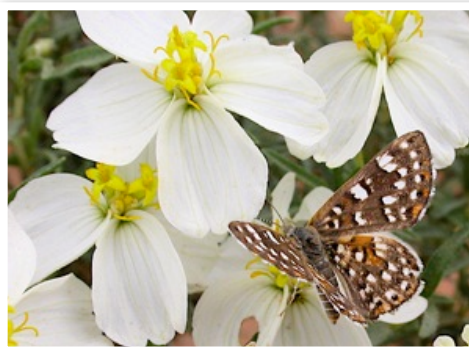
NEVER USE RAT POISONS!!! They have no long term effects on packrat populations and sickened or dead animals will be eaten by predators or pets and pass the poison on to them.

For more information on packrats visit [www.mrpackrat.net](http://www.mrpackrat.net).



*Kris Brown, owner of Mr. Packrat, has generously offered an additional 5% off current specials for his services if you mention this newsletter. Phone him at 520-529-9191.*





## Plant of the month

### Zinnia acerosa "Desert zinnia"

At 6 inches tall and 10 inches wide, Desert zinnia is too small to be called a shrub -- perennial wildflower is more apt, or shrublet, perhaps. Despite its diminutive size, however, it is a useful native species for no-irrigation gardens and wildlife plantings.

Desert zinnia is common in our area and ranges east into Texas and south into Mexico where it grows in dry locations with well drained soil at 2000 to 5000 feet elevation. White blossoms cover the hemispherical plant in spring and reappear on occasion during other parts of the warm season. The flowers dry and persist on the plant for months. It is popular with butterflies for its nectar and with seed-eating birds like finches and quail.

Because of its size and compact foliage, it doesn't add a lot of drama, but is great for softening a cactus and succulent garden or as a ground cover with other tough wildlife plants like Chuparosa, Desert hackberry, Wolfberry, and Four-winged saltbush. It requires no care in naturalistic gardens, but can be pruned back in fall for denser re-growth in spring.

## Opportunities

### Spring sculpture tour and Studio tour

"Ecological" sculpture is the focus of a tour sponsored by the Tucson district of the Association of Professional Landscape Designers. The event is on Saturday, March 20th and is an opportunity to connect with local artists who use recycled materials and found objects or create works that provide habitat for wildlife and promote appreciation of the Sonoran Desert.

The tour is aimed primarily at professionals in the landscape, design, and architecture fields but is open to others. Cost is \$75 per person and includes transportation, mid-morning coffee and pastries, and finishes with lunch at Acacia restaurant in St. Philip's Plaza.

Email me for a registration form. I'm helping organize the tour and also have roles as host and featured artist.



Dozens of local artists (including my wife and me) will have their studios open on the weekend of **March 13 and 14** for the **Tucson Artists Open Studio** weekend. For details, go to [www.tucsonopenstudios.com](http://www.tucsonopenstudios.com).

## Other notes

### In the next issue:

- Tough vines for AZ gardens
- Koushary: an Egyptian delight for vegans and exotic food lovers
- Blind snakes: tiny termite terrorizers
- Yellow flowered agave - a striking blue accent plant for hot dry gardens



### BUSY BEES IN YOUR GARDEN

The majority of bees in Arizona are solitary native types -- more than 800 species in Tucson alone! These little-known and often maligned creatures are indispensable pollinators of desert plants. Bee expert Dr. Steve Buchmann and landscape designer Greg Corman discuss these harmless native bees and demonstrate how to encourage them in urban gardens with native plants and nesting habitats.

**Sat., Mar. 6 / 10am / Tohono Chul Park**  
\$8 members/\$10 general public



*Feel free to forward this newsletter to friends or have them contact me to get on the mailing list. Past issues are available at [GardeningInsights.com](http://GardeningInsights.com).*

## GARDENING INSIGHTS - LANDSCAPE DESIGN AND ELEMENTS - "WHERE ART MEETS ECOLOGY"

Our LEAF\* design philosophy and practices include:

- \* Local plants, materials, art, 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

### COMMERCIAL & RESIDENTIAL PROJECTS

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