



Gardening Insights

February 2010

Tough vines for desert gardens

For ecologically sensitive gardens, it is always a good practice to select local or regional plants. We're fortunate to have a broad spectrum of native trees, shrubs, wildflowers and accent plants, but we are a bit limited when it comes to vines. That's not to say we don't have some great species, but they are not always easy to find at nurseries. Below are a few I have in my garden and some other species that would be fun to try if space weren't an issue! The photos above are in the same order as these three species.

Clematis drummondii "**Virgin's bower**" is a medium sized deciduous vine with prolific white flowers that give way to masses of attractive fuzzy seed heads. At lower elevations it prefers part shade and a little extra water - like what it would get with passive water harvesting. When established, it will be fine off irrigation.

Maurandya antirrhiniflora "**Snapdragon vine**" is a miniature vine that is fun to grow up ocotillos or small trellises. It dies to the ground in winter but comes back in spring with a delightful show of purple or red flowers.

Cissus trifoliata "**Grape ivy**" is a succulent-leaved twining vine that is great for growing into native trees as a textural complement. Like the species above, it prefers a little extra water in summer otherwise, it goes dormant when drought stressed and comes back when conditions improve.

Other terrific vines from our region include:

Cucurbita digitata "Coyote gourd" -- finger-like leaves and yellow tennis ball fruits - develops a large tuber
Callactia wrightii "Wright's Milkpea" -- purple flowers and foliage that attracts butterflies as larval food
Janusia gracilis "Slender janusia" -- miniature vine with yellow flowers - grow into another bush or on an ocotillo
Lachnostoma arizonicum "Arizona ribpod milkweed vine" -- cool ribbed fruits - great for butterfly gardens
Mascagnia macroptera "Yellow orchid vine" -- vigorous plant with yellow flowers and large papery fruits
Mascagnia lilacina "Purple mascagnia" -- purple flowers - grow it intertwined with its cousin, above
Merremia aurea "Yellow morning glory" -- delightful small species - evergreen with showy yellow flowers
Passiflora species "Passion vines" -- striking flowers and great for butterfly gardens - often devoured by caterpillars

Check for these terrific vines and more at Desert Survivors Nursery or at Tohono Chul Park. Both nurseries specialize in local species and are doing a magnificent job of introducing natives to the landscape trade.



Koushary: Egyptian comfort food

I owe it to some vegan friends for re-discovering this recipe for Koushary. I'd invited them for dinner after a hike and was wracking my brain for a quick, hearty, and tasty meal. My wife asked "what about that Egyptian lentil dish you used to make?" So I searched my cookbooks and found it - a delightfully aromatic one-dish meal with great textures provided by an improbable mix of rice, pasta and lentils. How could I have forgotten that?

Ingredients:

- 2 T. vegetable oil
- 1 large onion, diced
- 2 cloves garlic, crushed
- 1/2 tsp. each ground cumin and ground coriander
- 16 oz. cooked, drained lentils (yellow or green)
- 16 oz. can of chopped tomatoes
- Salt and pepper
- Fresh cilantro, coarsely chopped
- Cooked macaroni and Basmati rice (both warm)

Saute the onion and garlic in oil until golden then add the lentils, tomatoes, and cumin and coriander. Simmer for 10 minutes and add the fresh cilantro. Heat through, add salt and pepper to taste and remove it from the heat.

To serve, layer basmati rice and macaroni in a bowl and top with the lentil mix.

If you search the web, you'll find many variations (and spellings) of this recipe that include adding chile flakes to the lentils and/or layering crispy fried onions or cooked chick peas over the dish. At the café where I first had koushary in Cairo, they provided a small bowl of crushed red pepper mixed with crushed coriander seeds to sprinkle on for added zing. Those intolerant of gluten might try brown rice macaroni that's available in health food stores and Trader Joe's.



Don't forget! This weekend, March 13 and 14, is the Tucson Artists' Open Studio Tour. For maps and information, pick up a copy of **Zócalo** magazine or check **www.tucsonopenstudios.com**. The weather is going to be perfect!!!



Plant of the month

Opportunities

Other notes

Agave chrysantha -

Yellow flowered agave

This local agave is little used in landscapes and deserves greater attention. It has the color and drama of the much larger Agave americana (Century plant) but matures at just 3' across. It develops few "pups", so it doesn't require frequent cleanup either.

Golden flowered agave is a perfect accent plant for gardens without irrigation and its cool blue leaves contrast nicely with darker evergreens like Turpentine bush (Ericameria laricifolia) and Creosote.

As with most agaves, placement is important because of the extremely sharp leaf tips. Keep it well back from walkways and, if you need to nip the sharp ends, use a fingernail clipper and take off only 1/2 inch or less.

Every year, clean out any buildup of organic matter between the leaves. I just spray the stuff out with a hose. You can also use the hose to excavate around the base of a mature plant to remove pups. Once the soil is loose and moist, the pups pull out easily. Wear gloves and eye protection though!

Texas blind snakes

Keep your eyes peeled this summer for these slithery pink wonders as they hunt down ants and termite larvae in the dark of night. They're especially active during the monsoon and sometimes show up on sidewalks as they search for their meals. I've also found them under rocks and planters.

Blind snakes resemble earthworms but have a pearly sheen and scales and they aren't slimy. They feel cool and dry when you pick them up and they squirm around so quickly it's very hard to hang on. They will poop on your hands if handled but that's the worst they'll do because they're much too small to bite a human.

Take the risk of a little poo! Pick one up if you're lucky enough to see one. They're a marvel of nature and given their nighttime habits, it's a treat to find a blind snake.



In the next issue:

- Spring wildflowers
- Fragrance gardens
- Candied citrus peel
- Western mugwort: soft, scented and silvery.



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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

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