



Gardening Insights

March 2009

Nurturing Native Pollinators

News of honey bee troubles has helped raise awareness of the importance of pollinators for our food, our economy, and our environment. What remains little known however, is the importance of native pollinators in that equation. For example, there are over 4000 native bees in the US and 1300 in Arizona alone. They are very efficient pollinators and, unlike honeybees which came from Europe, the native bees tend to be solitary and stingless. Then there are the untold numbers of flies, butterflies and other critters that work ceaselessly and unnoticed to spread pollen from plant to plant. All of these creatures need our help to maintain a healthy desert environment. Here are a few tips.

Plant natives. Our local plants support an enormous range of insects -- they evolved together, after all. For example, Creosote is in flower now and is aswarm with native bees. Go stand by one and you'll be amazed. Mallow and desert marigold are also great; bees will curl up in their flowers for a nap. Have a look in the early morning and you'll see them there snoozing and dusted with pollen -- it's too cute!

Leave dead tree branches. If you have dead branches in trees that do not pose a safety issue, leave them in place. Beetles will bore into them, and when they leave their abandoned holes provide nesting sites for other insects.

Leave small areas of open dirt. Many bees nest in the ground so access to open soil is important for them.

Provide nesting sites with bee habitat sculptures. Some species of native bees will nest in man-made structures like the habitats pictured above. They are sculptures that double as nesting sites where bees will lay their eggs and hatch their young. I have these and other models for sale if you're interested in promoting pollinators.

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*Want to learn more about bee habitat sculptures? Visit us at the **SAHBA Home Show** in booth 2130. The show runs **Friday, April 3 to Sunday April 5** at the Tucson Convention Center.*

Visit www.sahbahomeshow.com for details. We hope to see you there!



Frugalscaping

The grand landscapes that splash across glossy gardening and architecture magazines are often frighteningly expensive and require full-time maintenance staffs. But that doesn't mean we should give up hope and live in barren dusty patches of buffelgrass and windblown plastic sacks. With patience, creativity, and a bit of physical labor we can have delightful outdoor living spaces while keeping costs in check. Here are some ideas.

First, **spruce up what you already have** and junk or donate stuff you haven't used in a year. Cleaning and simplifying transform a garden and make it easier to spot problems and imagine possibilities. Then retreat to the shade and page through magazines and books for ideas you like. Watch a bit of HGTV. The great ideas you find can often be replicated with the clever use of inexpensive materials. Let your imagination run wild - thinking is free after all.

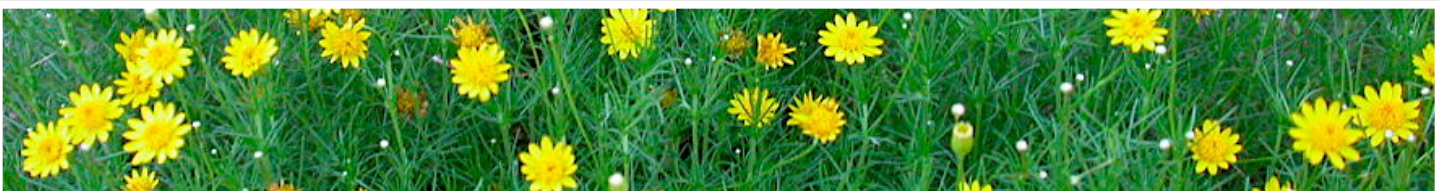
Now the real fun starts. **Visit the salvage yards. Prowl Craigslist.com and Freecycle.org. Cruise neighborhoods during brush and bulky pickup weeks.** You'll find everything from paving to planters, lighting to trellises and you'll be limited only by your creativity. If you're in Tucson, check the ReStore on 22nd Street for paint, hardware, and outdoor furniture. Reusing materials saves money and saves the planet by keeping valuable materials out of the landfill.

Planting can be an adventure too. One approach is to **plant only trees and accent plants and then spread seed for wildflowers and perennial shrubs.** The seeds will germinate during the winter or summer rainy seasons and you can edit as needed until you get the desired plant combinations and density.

Ask friends and neighbors for cuttings and buy only inexpensive small plants at nurseries (most grow quickly because of our long warm season). Join *Tucson Cactus and Succulent Society*; they sell rescued cacti for bargain prices. But don't get any ideas about collecting in the desert yourself, though. Native plants are protected by law and there are hefty fines for filching greenery from the wild.

Irrigation systems are costly, so **choose drought tolerant native plants and harvest rainwater** to make the most of our precipitation. Swales (low areas) and berms (high areas) concentrate rainwater where it's needed and stop it running into the street. Plants thrive with the extra moisture. Brad Lancaster, a Tucson water harvesting guru, has a terrific book on the subject called *Rainwater Harvesting for Drylands*. Also see the folks at *Desert Survivors Nursery* about plants that grow well here without irrigation.

Frugal landscaping might not be the quickest and easiest path to your own Eden, but it will be less expensive, more ecologically sound, and ultimately more satisfying as it displays your handiwork and creativity. Every scavanged piece will have a story and every hand-me-down plant will be a warm reminder of friends and family.





Plant of the Month:

Wolfberry (Lycium species)

If you're nuts about birds, you'll want to make space in your garden for a wolfberry. These dense, thickety shrubs are perfect hideaways for quail and other feathered visitors, and they'll find edible fruits as well as protection.

There are ten Wolfberry species in Arizona and several are available in nurseries that sell native plants.

Lycium fremontii might be the most common. It has purple flowers, succulent, pale green leaves and small tomato-like red fruits. It is very drought tolerant when established and requires little care if sited where it won't need pruning. This species will grow into a giant gumdrop about 8 feet tall and 8 feet wide, especially if it is placed in a swale or other area where it gets runoff from rainstorms.

Team this plant up with desert hackberry, saltbushes, and velvet mesquites, and you'll have a bird magnet yard. Wolfberry is also an effective screen plant and security barrier in alleys and easements.

Birds and Plants of Bolivia - join us for a thrilling tour in March 2010!

Bolivia is off most tourists' maps but it is a real gem for anyone interested in nature, architecture, and history. It has remarkably diverse landscapes, traveling is safe, and the people and food are terrific.

This WINGS trip, co-lead by **Greg Corman** and **Rich Hoyer**, is for people who are interested in birds and plants but want to experience Bolivian culture as well. The itinerary includes the mountainous central highlands, the Chaco desert and the historic cities of Potosi and Sucre and ends with a few days at Refugio los Volcanes. The Refugio is surrounded by jungle and tall sandstone cliffs in a remote valley where birds, monkeys and amazing plants abound--it is a place you won't want to leave and you will certainly never forget!

On our last trip we saw over 330 species of birds, a wild diversity of plants, and many butterflies, reptiles and other wonderful creatures.

See WINGS (wingsbirds.com) for pricing and call me for details.

In the next issue:

- Rainwater harvesting
- Small, tough palms for poolside planting and containers
- Tidi Ozeri, the metal magician
- Tansyleaf aster - a lovely purple daisy for spring color

Ideas for classes?

I teach several classes a year and would love to have your suggestions! What topics would you like to explore? Where do you need more information to make your gardening more fun and more successful? Let me know and I'll pull together some classes that will help you out.

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Speaking of classes....

Monsoon Gardening

Sat., Jun. 6 / 10am / Ed. Ctr. #1
Tohono Chul Park

I'll discuss water harvesting, summer planting techniques, and the amazing variety of hot weather species that make it worth sticking it out year 'round in Tucson.

\$4 members/\$8 general public



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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