

# Gardening Insights

April 2009

## *Water features for birds and animals*

With summer coming on, it's hard not to feel sorry for the poor critters who'll have to brave the sweltering heat without the luxury of air conditioning. One way to assist them is to provide a safe clean water source to quench their thirst. Here are a couple tips.

**Create a source with running, not stagnant, water.** Still water can harbor pathogens that pass from animal to animal as they share a source. Slow running water that drains to the ground remains clean and is not wasteful if it irrigates nearby trees and shrubs. We created the stone features above by fitting them with copper tubing and small valves. We set the flow rate to one drip every couple of seconds. This volume is sufficient to keep the water fresh but not great enough to affect my client's water bills. They certainly don't use more water than what it takes to wash, rinse, and refill a bird bath every day or two.

Following from above, **avoid bird baths.** Pathogens are one issue but mosquito problems might be even worse. In just a few days, a basin of standing water can breed hordes of mosquitos -- and nobody likes them but bats!

**Design your water feature as a sculptural element.** If it's appealing to you and the creatures, you both win.

**Place the feature for wildlife safety.** This is especially important in yards with cats. Site the water source far enough from dense cover that visitors won't be ambushed. This provides no guarantees about bird-eating Cooper's hawks, however. They might fly in for a drink and a nibble!

## *Speaking of water....*

I'm proud to announce that **Gardening Insights** won the **Judges' Award for Water Conservation** in the 2009 Xeriscape contest sponsored by the AZ Department of Water Resources and Tucson Botanical Gardens. The award is for my own yard which has no irrigation system but utilizes gray water, passive water harvesting and local plants to create a landscape that is beautiful, wildlife friendly, and ecologically sensitive.



## Small tough palms

I'm known as a fanatic about local plants, so people are often surprised to learn that I love palms. Well, some palms. Arizona's native California fan palm is one, plus there are several terrific species from the Sonoran desert in Mexico, especially those in the genus *Brahea*. Two palms described below merit planting here too. They are tough miniature species that tolerate cold and heat and fit locations that require thornless, clean, and evergreen plants. Poolsides, small patios, and large containers are sites where these plants are excellent choices.

Dwarf palmetto (*Sabal minor*) is a resident of the southeastern U.S., that performs well in Tucson with irrigation every week to ten days. It has bright green leaves with an upright posture and droopy edges that rustle like dry paper in soft breezes. It provides a soft tropical feel in a landscape and requires no care but removal of dead leaves. The specimen in the photo (above left) is mature sized. It tolerates Tucson freezes and thrives in partial shade. I would not suggest this plant for hot south or west exposures.

For the hot spots, try Mazari palm (*Nannorrhops ritchieana*) which is native to the area that includes Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey. Click [here](#) to see a photo of the plant in habitat. This bushy palm thrives where it's sunny, dry and hot and it withstands severe cold, even snow. The cool blue foliage is striking against a brick wall or in combination with orange flowered plants. When established, it should grow well with just monthly irrigation, but as with all palms, I'd supplement its diet with a yearly application of a chelated micronutrient mix. (One called Microplex is available from *Crop Production Services* on Highway Drive. Call 293-4330. It's great for citrus and many other exotic plants too.)

For a poolside planting, consider mixing these palms with super clean grass-like plants such as *Calibanus hookeri*, Beargrass, and Hesperaloe, plus succulents like Partridge breast aloe, Candelilla, and Slipper plant.

These lovely palm species might not be available at all commercial nurseries, so if you have trouble finding them, call me and I'll locate them for you.



Our **bee habitat sculptures** are getting attention in several places. They'll be noted in the June issue of Phoenix Home and Garden and are noted in Sunset Magazine's "[Fresh Dirt](#)" blog. Check them out there and at Tohono Chul Park this summer where one of the sculptures will be in their Re-Visions show, a collection of art pieces made from recycled materials. The exhibit runs from May 21 to August 23.





### Plant of the Month:

Tansyleaf aster (*Aster tanacetifolius*)

Yellow flowers abound in the Sonoran Desert, so it's nice to have a bit of purple to complement them. Tansyleaf aster is one of few wildflowers in that color and it thrives with little care or irrigation. The literature has it as a summer bloomer, though mine have been in flower all spring.

Tansyleaf aster (also known as Tahoka daisy) grows to 16 inches tall and has ferny gray-green foliage. Like most daisies, it should be a magnet for butterflies and seed eating birds like lesser goldfinches.

There are related Aster species with purple flowers and all should grow well from seed. Otherwise, plants are available at native plant nurseries like Desert Survivors and Tohono Chul Park.

Mix Tansyleaf aster with yellow bloomers like Paperflower, Desert senna, Desert marigold, Bahia, and Palmer's mallow.



### Tidhar (Tidi) Ozeri: Metal Artist

Tidi is the owner of Ozeri Metal Designs and is a magician with steel. His workshop is a boys' heaven with roostertails of sparks flying everywhere along with earsplitting noise from the grinding, pounding and cutting of metal. All the drama results in delightful works of art that include gates and trellises, doors and window coverings, plus garden sculptures.

Tidi and I worked together on the bee habitat sculptures that were illustrated in the last issue. He is a patient teacher and wonderful source of creative inspiration for works that range from traditional southwest style to mid-century modern.

We're fortunate to have this Israeli expat living and working here in Tucson. I highly recommend him for any metal projects.

Tidi can be reached at 520-481-8073 or visit his website at [ozerimetaldesigns.com](http://ozerimetaldesigns.com)



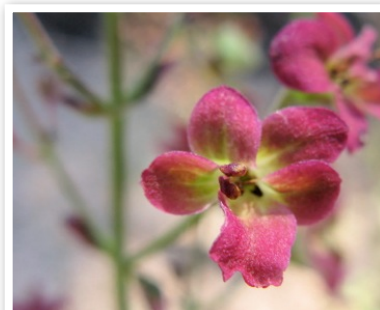
### In the next issue:

- How to find an expert to care for your trees.
- Great reads for plant lovers by Greg Starr, Kirti Mathura and Scott Calhoun.
- Creosote bush: An over-achieving plant that is under-loved and too little used.
- Mesquite pods: A tasty, healthy summer treat.



Past issues of this newsletter are available at [GardeningInsights.com](http://GardeningInsights.com).

Feel free to forward this letter to friends or have them contact me if they wish to be on the mailing list.



### 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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