



Gardening Insights

May 2009

How to find expert tree care

Trees are the most important living elements in our landscapes and provide shade, beauty, bird habitat and much more: their care should be left to experts who understand the art and science of pruning. There are many unskilled “tree trimmers” out there and it’s often impossible to remedy the damage they cause to large or old specimens. To make matters worse, the owner will have paid hundreds or thousands of dollars for the “service”!

Here are a couple tips to help you get the best care for your trees.

1. **Hire a certified arborist or trained horticulturist.** Ask for credentials and check the [International Society of Arboriculture](http://www.internationalarborsociety.org/) for lists of local experts.
2. **Educate yourself on the basics of tree care.** It is not rocket science. Read the two articles below and you’ll have all the information you need to hire a suitable tree care professional. The fifteen minutes it takes could save you lots of money and no end of heartache.
3. **Ask a potential service provider if they know the difference between heading, thinning, and reduction cuts -** you’ll know these terms from your reading. If they don’t know, keep looking.
4. **See if they wear safety equipment on the job.** Helmets, gloves, and eye and ear protection? Pros do.

I often refer Tucson clients to Juan Barba. He’s a certified arborist and has instructed many professionals in the art and science of pruning (including me). He can be reached at 520-907-4841.

••• Pruning Information •••

<http://csfs.colostate.edu/pdfs/613.pdf>

<http://www.cmg.colostate.edu/gardennotes/616.pdf>



Don't spray it, sauté it! Edible summertime weeds.

Gardeners have difficulty relaxing during the monsoon because the moisture incites a riot of greenery, much of it weedy. "Nuking" the landscape with poisons is what some people opt for, but there is a less hazardous and more environmentally friendly possibility -- eating the weeds. Many are edible when young and tender.

Three species described below are common in alleys, abandoned lots, and roadsides. If you're unsure of their identifications, get a good field guide or take samples to experts before eating them. There aren't a lot of poisonous weeds, but it's best not to take chances. Once you start eating these wild plants, you might find yourself encouraging neighbors to let their places go trashy!

Amaranth (*Amaranthus* species) Also known as Pigweed, Quelite, Goosefoot (above left)

All the amaranths are edible, producing delicious greens that can be eaten green or cooked. These plants are very common summer weeds in Tucson and reproduce prolifically from small black edible seeds. They get 4 to 6 feet tall and one healthy plant can supply an entire meal's worth of greens. Collect the tender ends of each branch. Sauté or steam them and eat as-is or use them in omelettes, stirfries, or soups as you would spinach.

Lamb's quarters (*Chenopodium* species)

Lamb's quarters is a vigorous summer plant that can reach 6 feet tall in good conditions. The leaves and young shoots are edible raw or cooked and have a mild flavor like spinach. All *Chenopodium* species are edible.

Purslane (*Portulaca oleracea*) (above right)

Purslane is a very nutritious, if somewhat mucilaginous, summer plant and forms low mats of succulent leaves. All parts of the plant are edible and have a slightly tangy flavor that is delicious when pan fried with tomato and onion. It can be eaten green in salads, cooked, or added to soups. In Mexico, the greens are called *verdolagas* and recipes are at the sites below.

<http://chanfiles.com/comida/verdolagas/index.html>

<http://www.mexconnect.com/en/articles/2211-juana-perez-pork-with-greens-puerco-con-verdolagas-de-juana-perez>



Since we're on the topic of Mexican food, I suggest you check out **Anita's Street Market**. This out-of-the-way bakery creates incredible thin tasty tortillas that are almost too hot to touch when you buy them. They are simply the best around. The bakery is located south of Speedway and west of Main by the railroad tracks in a hidden and very old neighborhood. It's worth finding, believe me!

Anita's Street Market 849 N. Anita Avenue 520-882-5280



Plant of the Month:

Creosote (Larrea divaricata)

Perhaps Creosote (also known as Chaparral) is underrated by virtue of its ubiquity. It forms nearly pure stands in parts of the Sonoran and Chihuahuan deserts and covers thousands of square miles. But dismissing this plant is a mistake. It is remarkably drought tolerant, evergreen, clean, easy to grow, and can live for thousands of years! With occasional pruning it stays compact and provides good screening. It could also be espaliered on walls and pruned into a small tree.

Creosote has the reputation of killing other plants with a root exudate, but that is probably untrue. It just sucks up rainfall quickly and keeps others from thriving. In gardens with adequate irrigation or water harvesting, there is little evidence of malevolence on its part.

It harbors several species of native bees and its resinous leaves provide the wonderful smell of rain. That alone is reason enough to plant one.

For fun facts on it and other plants, check this site:

<http://waynesword.palomar.edu/ww0601.htm#oldseed>

Mesquite pods - as food?

Mesquites have had a bumper crop of flowers this year and that means they'll be heavy with long tan pods within a few weeks. Do you know that the pods are sweet and tasty? They can be ground into a delicious flour for baking and were a staple in the diets of Native Americans for millenia. In addition to sugars, they contain up to 40% protein.

Pod flavor varies from tree to tree, so it's best to try them before grinding them or having them ground -- they should have a sweet caramel taste. Ripe pods come off the tree easily.

The seeds are as hard as stone, so grinding must be done in a very substantial machine and the pods need to be very dry. The easiest solution is to have them done by Desert Harvesters, a local group that uses a hammermill for processing pods with ease. They charge a nominal amount for the service. See their website below for more information on grinding pods and cooking with the flour.

<http://www.desertharvesters.org/recipes/>

In the next issue:

- Great summer reads for plant nuts.
- Monsoon plants: Summer beauties that love the heat.
- Plumbago scandens, a native shade loving plant. (Photo above)
- Tools for summer pruning.



Upcoming 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.



*When Grass is Not a Lawn:
Designing with Native Grasses*
Sat., Oct. 17 / 2pm / Ed. Ctr. #1
Tohono Chul Park

Don't know a sprangletop from a tanglehead? Scott Calhoun and Greg Corman discuss native grasses, focusing on the toughest and easiest species for Tucson landscapes.



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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