



# Gardening Insights

May 2010

## *El Porvenir - Helping Nicaragua's rural poor*

El Porvenir is a nonprofit whose mission is to assist Nicaragua's rural communities with sustainable self-help projects. They have 20 years of experience sharing appropriate technologies like wells, latrines, community washing stations, and fuel efficient stoves as well as providing villagers with the skills they need to manage their water, sanitation, and forestry resources.

Nicaragua is one of the poorest countries in the western hemisphere. Women and children must often walk up to a mile to reach water and carry it back in buckets that weigh as much as forty pound when filled. It is grueling work and the trip might need to be repeated several times a day over rough and steep paths. To eliminate this hardship, El Porvenir helps communities create wells so a local source of water is available. The projects are requested by, and undertaken with, local communities whose members pitch in. They hand-dig wells up to fifty feet deep and install rope pumps that were designed in Nicaragua. The pumps are made with inexpensive local parts that are easy to replace.

In 1993, El Porvenir started doing sanitation projects including latrines and community wash stations. The latter have a covered area for clothes washing and private bath stalls where users can go in, lock the door, and take a bucket bath with clean water from the nearby well. Wash stations are built near a well to reduce the burden on women of carrying water or clothes long distances for washing. Bathing with clean water reduces problems with skin bacteria and parasites. Community health education is provided before and after project implementation.

The organization also implements reforestation projects to rebuild and protect the watersheds that feed local rivers and recharge aquifers. Forests have been cleared for agriculture, cattle grazing, commercial logging, and firewood to such a degree that Nicaragua lost over 20% of its forests between 1990 and 2005. Seedlings are grown and planted around villages, particularly in micro-watersheds that their water projects depend on. Along with replanting, families are helped to build fuel efficient stoves that reduce firewood use and minimize their exposure to smoke.

El Porvenir offers work trips to Nicaragua throughout the year and a Tucson contingent (including me, I hope) is going in February 2011. It's an opportunity to work with villagers on a water or sanitation project or to plant trees. You can choose a level of work that fits you and there will be time to explore some of Nicaragua's forests, wildlife, birds, food, and culture. For more information on work trips see [www.elporvenir.org](http://www.elporvenir.org), or email Val Little about the Tucson group at [VLITTLESTER@gmail.com](mailto:VLITTLESTER@gmail.com). We'd welcome you even if you're not from here.....



## Small trees for AZ landscapes

Trees are usually the largest and most important components of a landscape, so getting the “right trees for the right places” is essential for a design that will function well and look good. This might seem obvious, but poor tree choices are common and it’s not hard to find evidence like “truck-pruned” street trees, mangled plantings under utility wires, and topped trees near billboards. These problems are usually the result of putting BIG trees where SMALL trees would have been better.

Below are descriptions of small trees for planting in the desert areas of southern Arizona. “Small” trees as ones that normally grow to 20 feet tall or less and can be pruned to have single or multiple trunks and a raised canopy. The trees are low or moderate water users and are proven to tolerate the heat and cold of this area. Please note that some trees will do well only in warmer microclimates and that some can exceed 20 feet tall in favorable conditions with high water applications.

### **Acacia constricta “Whitethorn acacia”**

Whitethorn is a multi-trunked tree. It has small compound leaves (which drop in winter) and fragrant yellow flowers in summer. It tolerates poor soils, drought, and cold.

### **Acacia greggii “Catclaw acacia”**

Catclaw is generally a shrub to 15 feet tall but occasionally grows larger. It can be pruned into an attractive single or multi-trunked tree and with time its wicked thorns are up and out of the way. It is very drought and cold tolerant and is long-lived.

### **Acacia willardiana “Palo blanco”**

This might be the best small tree for planting close to structures because it is slow growing and never develops large lateral branches. The bark is smooth and white and the foliage is sparse and pendulous.

### **Celtis ehrenbergia (pallida) “Desert hackberry”**

This hackberry is a thorny evergreen shrub with zigzag branches. It can be pruned into a tree (wear armor!) and is great for tough background locations. Birds love it. It provides cover, nesting sites, and edible fruits. It is very drought and cold tolerant.

### **Ebenopsis ebano (Pithecellobium flexicaule) “Texas ebony”**

This (mostly) evergreen tree has glossy dark foliage that lends a tropical effect to a garden. It is very thorny and difficult to maintain when small but eventually grows beyond the need for pruning. It even looks good bare with interesting gray bark and zigzag branches.

### **Eysenhardtia orthocarpa “Kidneywood”**

Kidneywood grows upright and reaches 15 feet tall. It is a deciduous tree with shaggy tan bark and fragrant white flowers. It is easy to maintain, thornless, and quite clean because its leaflets and seeds are small. It attracts marine blue and other butterflies.

### **Fraxinus greggii “Little leaf ash”**

This small ash tree grows slowly and is easily pruned into a multi-trunked tree. It is evergreen and thornless. Little leaf ash is good for oasis zone plantings where its deep green foliage provides a lush, cool effect.

### **Haematoxylum brasiletto “Brazilwood”**

Brazilwood is a stunning specimen tree for areas with warm microclimates. It has fluted trunks, beautiful yellow flowers, and attractive foliage. Brazilwood should be planted where its amazing character can be easily appreciated up close.

### **Havardia pallens (Pithecellobium pallens) “Tenaza”**

Tenaza is an upright, thorny, and ferny tree that grows quickly and makes a great street or median tree. Its fuzzy flowers attract many insects and are fragrant too. It is typically evergreen and tolerates temperatures to the low 20s.

### **Lysiloma watsoni “Desert fern tree”**

This tree grows wild in the Rincon Mountains near Tucson. As its name suggests, it has ferny foliage and is soft and lush in a garden. It prefers sites that don’t get heavy frosts--in the low 20s it can be damaged. It grows at a slow to moderate rate but is easy to care for and worth the wait.

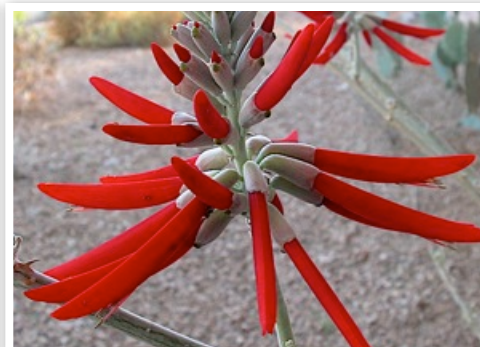
### **Sapindus drummondii “Western soapberry”**

This Arizona native has attractive foliage that turns brilliant yellow in fall and has strange fruits that look like translucent plastic balls containing a single black seed. The fruits can be soaked in water to produce a soapy liquid--hence the common name.

### **Vauquelinia californica “Arizona rosewood”**

Rosewood is usually a shrub, but grows into an attractive, upright tree to 20 feet tall even in nature. Stiff evergreen leaves resemble oleander but are saw-toothed. Clusters of white flowers appear in spring. Rosewood is a tough plant that is only for the patient--it is very slow growing.





## Plant of the month

### Banana yucca - Yucca baccata

This native succulent is widespread in the West and is a popular landscape plant because it is attractive, easy to grow, and requires little care except, perhaps, if it grows more branches than are desired.

Its natural range is typically a little higher than Tucson's elevation, but it does well here with a monthly watering or in a spot with passive water harvesting.

There are a few forms of this plant, some with straight leaves and some with wavy leaves. The latter are more interesting but both are worthy plants with curly hairs on the leaf edges that add texture.

It produces banana-like fruits that are supposedly edible but contain enough moth larvae that I'm not sure if they'd qualify as a vegetable or a protein.

Companion plants for Banana yucca include Turpentine bush, Ocotillo, Fish hook or Colville barrel cacti, Wright's buckwheat, and wildflowers like dogweed, verbena, and penstemon. For a "fruit salad" garden, team it up with Strawberry hedgehog and Pima pineapple cacti, AZ grape ivy, Thorn apple, and Wolfberry.

## Opportunities

### My favorite tree books

There are many tree books out there, but if you're going to own any, I'd suggest a pair of them written in the 1950s by Donald Culross Peatie. The titles are *A natural history of trees of eastern and central North America* and *A natural history of western trees*. They provide excellent botanical information as well as charmingly written essays on each species' uses and characteristics. There are few plant books this entertaining or as visually rich -- each tree is illustrated with a wood cut print and some of them are magnificent.

I've got a couple of vintage hardbacks, but the books have been reissued in paperback and are available used (and cheap) through Amazon.com.



Snuggle up to read the books with a great cup of tea. **Seven Cups**, at the corner of Tucson Blvd. and 6th St. has a large selection of organic Chinese teas. My choice is the Lapsang Souchong Strong Smoke which is all the fun of a campfire in a cup and has enough body to substitute for coffee (and a cigarette!). If you prefer green teas, try their Meng Ding Snow Drop Jasmine. It is simply wonderful!

## Other notes

### In the next issue:

- Poolside planting
- Ten tips for sustainable landscapes
- Tucson insider shopping spots
- Coral bean



When my friend and competitor, **Scott Calhoun**, told me he was writing a blog for big-box Lowe's, I wondered if he'd sold his soul to the devil. Thankfully, it's not so. His work for them is every bit as good as his other writing and it's a blog worth following.

You can read his entries at:  
[gardengrowalong.blogspot.com](http://gardengrowalong.blogspot.com)



Baby Great Horned Owl

## GARDENING INSIGHTS - LANDSCAPE DESIGN AND SCULPTURE - "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 outdoor elements
- \* Functional design for spaces that are easy to live in and easy to maintain

### COMMERCIAL & RESIDENTIAL PROJECTS

Greg Corman 520-603-2703 [greg@gardeninginsights.com](mailto:greg@gardeninginsights.com) [www.gardeninginsights.com](http://www.gardeninginsights.com)

