Gardening Insights

Monsoon plants for desert gardens

It's hard not to pity the people who leave Tucson for summer. While they're chilling in the breezes of coastal California or dipping their toes along the lake shores of the midwest, we're here enjoying the Sonoran Desert at its best. They miss the bounty of plants and critters that emerge for brief and frenzied lives and disappear again before they return; coming home when the party's over.

Some of the summer plants they miss come up from underground tubers -- species like Saiya (Amoreuxia palmatifida) and the yellow flowered devil's claw (Proboscidea altheifolia). They flower, fruit, and vanish again until the following year. Others come up from seed only when we have abundant rains. They include Arizona poppy (Kalstroemia grandiflora) whose orange flowers are pictured above, and Prickly poppy (Argemone pleicantha) a gray, untouchable wildflower with delicate white petals.
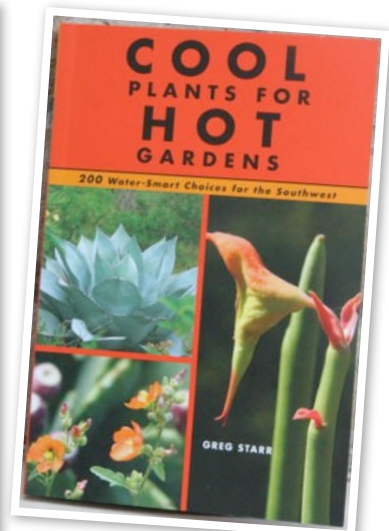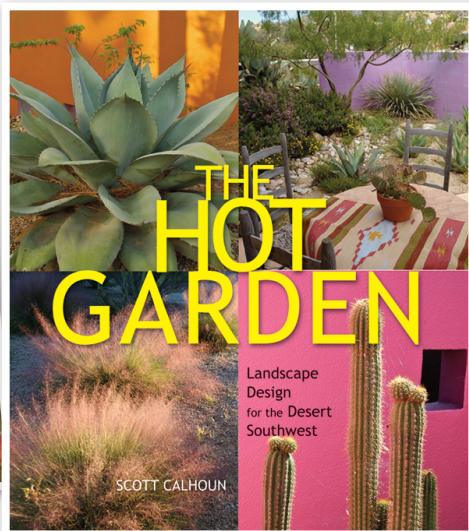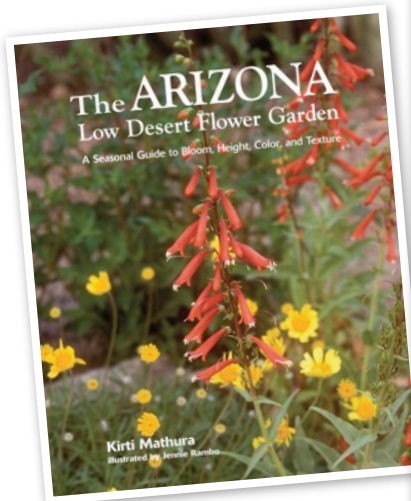
Yet other plants are above ground in plain view but hold off until summer to shine. These include Desert zinnia (Zinnia acerosa: above white), and Velvet pod mimosa (Mimosa dysocarpa: above pink). Violet ruellia (Ruellia nudiflora: above blue) comes and goes in the garden, but blooms primarily in summer and provides a nice complement to the yellow and orange flowers of many local plants.

The bright colors are an obvious benefit of these summer species, but they are also nurture thousands of kinds of native pollinators, from birds and butterflies to bees and beetles.

Try incorporating summer plants into your garden to reward yourself for sticking it out here. In addition to the above plants, here are a few of my favorites in no particular order. Desert senna (Senna covesii), Desert cotton (Gossypium thurberi), Rock hibiscus (Hibiscus denudatus), Yellow menodora (Menodora scabra), Sandpaper bush (Mortonia scabrella), Fish hook barrel cactus (Ferocactus wislizeni), and Shrubby senna (Senna wislizeni).

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For pictures and descriptions of lovely local wildflowers, check out Firefly Forest: www.fireflyforest.com/

Summertime reads for plant nuts

There is a direct correlation between temperatures above 90 degrees and my lack of enthusiasm for garden work, but heat doesn't dampen my interest in reading about gardening. Three recent books are among those I'm enjoying while cloistered in the air conditioning.

The Hot Garden is Scott Calhoun's latest effort. He is a landscape designer and garden writer and is a popular teacher in the Southwest. His works combine fact with humor and reflect his passion for the interesting and unusual members of the plant family. This book is a guide to combining plants and other garden elements to create beautiful and water thrifty desert spaces. It illustrates creative ideas from designers across the southwest (including yours truly) who are leading voices for a new ecological desert aesthetic.

Greg Starr is widely regarded for his expertise on agaves, but is a wealth of knowledge on other species for desert landscaping. **Cool Plants for Hot Gardens** compiles years of research on 200 desert plants including identification, care, and growth requirements. There are summaries for all species that make it easy to compare and combine them in a garden. Greg is a teacher and owner of Starr Nursery in Tucson.

Kirti Mathura is a horticulturist and curator at the Desert Botanical Gardens in Phoenix. She's created a delightful and easy to use volume called **The Arizona Low Desert Flower Garden** that features tri-cut flip pages for comparing plants. The format makes it possible to visualize how colors will blend in the garden and serves as a guide to designing, planning, and caring for a garden. It includes growing season, height at bloom stage, propagation method, and sunlight requirements for hundreds of low-water plants.

All three books reflect a new attitude of water conservation and an appreciation of southwest native plants that thrive here without extraordinary effort.

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Air conditioners as a water source

In the humid part of summer, an air conditioning unit can squeeze 10 gallons of fresh water from the air every day. This water is a valuable resource for irrigating a landscape or watering vegetables and houseplants. However, it is often plumbed to go down a vent stack on the roof or to drip out of a pipe near the house where it does little good. Take advantage of this clean free water by running it to your garden or into a cistern. You might check with your plumber or AC expert first: you want to avoid having water back up into the cooling system. NOTE: Water coming from evaporative coolers is saturated with salts and should NOT be used on plants.

Plant of the month

Plumbago scandens (Summer snow)

Blue Plumbago, an exotic plant, is a familiar garden specimen in Arizona, but our native, white flowered species is little used. It is an evergreen, sprawling shrub that thrives in shade and turns an eye-popping burgundy color in winter. It flowers off and on year around and requires little care if kept on a moderate water diet. A typical size for this species is 2′ x 2′, but I've seen them growing around natural springs where they were 6′ x 6′ masses that clambered over anything nearby. In a landscape, it will do best if watered deeply once a month after establishment. It might freeze back in very cold Tucson locations but recover in spring.

Plumbago is great to plant under Velvet mesquite in swales where water collects during rainstorms. It is also an attractive mate for Desert willow and Netleaf hackberry trees. Fellow shade lovers like Bamboo muhly grass and Red justicia would work well with it in a native garden oasis.

Tools for summer pruning

Getting smacked in the forehead by a cluster of bean pods is the cue to reshape my mesquites. If you are having that experience, you might want to arm yourself with tools for fighting back the summer droop.

Three tools are indispensable. First is a pair of bypass pruners like those shown above. Felco makes the best, but Corona also makes a good set for less money. These are suitable for branches up to 1/4 inch diameter. Next are loppers, which are just long-handled versions of pruners and work on materials up to 1 inch. The third great tool is a folding pruning saw. Again, Felco makes the best. The small, fiercely sharp blades zip through wood up to 4 inches diameter in no time. Armed with these tools, you can do all the work a homeowner should take on. Work that is above your reach or requires cutting of large branches can be risky. Call an arborist for that.

PS: I get my pruning tools at UAP. 4429 N. Highway Dr.   293-4330

In the next issue

- Tips for landscaping commercial properties
- D.I.Y. habitats for native bees
- Desert ferns? No, I'm not kidding...
- Tucson Audubon's course on desert habitat design

Upcoming Classes

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.
$8 members/$10 general public.

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Native bees!

Anna Howell, a recent UA graduate, will discuss native bees and their role in our desert on **Thursday, June 25th** at Tucson Botanical Gardens. Anna's knowledge is impressive and her enthusiasm is contagious. Call TBG for more information at 326-9686.

Anna's got a great blog at: buzzybeegirl.wordpress.com

GARDENING INSIGHTS - LANDSCAPE DESIGN AND CONSULTING

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* **A**rtistic, inspiring, and creative uses of plants, sculpture, and other elements
* **F**unctional design for spaces that are easy to live in and easy to maintain

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