



# Gardening Insights

September 2009

## *Treasure hunting at Tucson's salvage yards*

Some of my fondest childhood memories include playing in abandoned cars and poking through piles of detritus in the open dumps on the outskirts of my small home town. The dumps were neither safe nor ecologically sound, but I miss the days when one could wander amongst the castoffs looking for value where others saw waste. The days are gone though -- or gone at least until a couple of centuries from now when archaeologists will sort carefully through our "sanitary landfills" and thrill in their discoveries.

Fortunately, there are a few salvage yards in Tucson that offer some sense of a treasure hunt. Gerson's is probably the best known and they stock a broad range of materials from used appliances to steel fencing and a great deal in between. It is well organized (too well?) and is one of my favorite places to search for scrap to turn into garden sculptures and furniture. The photos above show items I found there and used for planters and as bases for a bench and bee habitat.

Two other companies offer a slightly smaller range of items but are worth frequent visits. One is Barnett and Shore on West Silverlake. It is the place to shop for used lumber, brick, and other building materials and their prices are very reasonable. Likewise for Taylor Demolition on Benson Highway. They have a mix of inventory that can inspire great landscape or building projects.

For visits to salvage yards take a large pickup truck, wear gloves and heavy shoes, and carry a tape measure and sketch pad. Then let your imagination go wild and fill the truck with goodies! By the way, I'll be leading a field trip to these places in February for Tohono Chul Park, with my friend and colleague Scott Calhoun. I will let you know the details soon.

### **Gerson's Used Building Materials**

1811 S. Park Ave. • Tucson, AZ 85713 • (520) 624-8585 • [www.gersons.net](http://www.gersons.net)

### **Barnett & Shore**

819 W. Silverlake Rd. • Tucson, AZ 85713 • (520) 791-0286

### **Taylor Demolition**

1325 E. Benson Hwy. • Tucson, AZ 85714 • (520) 632-0410





### *Shrubs for security and bird habitat*

One drawback of urban life is the need for home security. Fortunately, the spiny local shrubs below provide a solution that is literally green and as effective as a moat and vats of boiling oil. The plants will repel anyone, require little maintenance, and provide much needed food, cover, and nesting habitat for native birds. They work well outside of existing fences, along alleys, or as stand-alone barriers. There are other plants that serve the same purposes, but these are three of my favorites.

**Graythorn** (*Zizyphus obtusifolia*: above left) is the plant world's equivalent of razor wire. Except for a short period in summer when it has leaves, it is composed of nothing but two inch long and very stout spikes. It forms a tangled mass 6 feet or more tall and thrives in Tucson with no irrigation. It grows rather slowly, but is more vigorous if it receives runoff during storms. Birds love the fruits and use its contorted branches for nesting sites. Graythorn requires little pruning, but when it does, hire someone else to do it!

**Desert hackberry** (*Celtis pallida*: above center) is evergreen, stiff and very spiny. Birds love them for the dense cover and the tasty orange fruits. It tolerates heat, cold, and drought and can reach a height of 12' or more. It can be pruned into an upright hedge or even into a small tree. In very cold winters, Desert hackberry might lose its leaves but it regrows them quickly when the weather warms up.

**Staghorn cholla** (*Cylindropuntia versicolor*: above right) is a bushy form of cholla. It provides a formidable security barrier but delights the eye with large and profuse flowers that range from chartreuse to orange to deep red. It is stunning in bloom and a fencerow of these in different colors would be simply amazing. Like all chollas, it can be started from any small chunks of the plant - even fruits. Just lay the bits on the ground and they will take root. What could be easier? Cactus wrens and thrashers will appreciate the nesting sites and native bees will be attracted to the nectar and pollen in bloom season.

Birders loathe the metaphor "killing two birds with one stone" but native plant security screens certainly do that!



A hedge of tightly planted **Ocotillos** also forms a great barrier. But field harvested specimens of this plant, especially those trucked in from far away, have a failure rate that can exceed 50%. The cheaper option in the long-run is to install boxed or seed grown ocotillos which are nearly 100% reliable. **Plants for the Southwest** grows them in large numbers and sells them in 1 and 5 gallon containers. See them at 50 E. Blackledge Street, near the corner of Ft. Lowell and Stone, or phone (520) 628-8773.





### Plant of the month

#### Guaiacum coulteri (Guayacán)

When clients want shrubs for year-round beauty, this is one I recommend for warm microclimates in Tucson. Its dark evergreen leaves evoke the subtropical feel of its home in Sonora and southern Mexico. And a real treat comes in summer when it bears flowers of pure indigo that are unlike anything else in our landscapes. They are simply stunning - and followed by equally interesting yellow fruits. Again, this plant needs a protected location to thrive here and typically reaches about 6 feet by 6 feet in size.

An especially verdant and colorful summer landscape could be had by teaming Guayacán with Texas ebony (*Ebanopsis ebano*), a tree of similar appearance, plus some of the shrub's Mexican amigos like Red bird of paradise (*Caesalpinia pulcherrima*), Baja fairy duster (*Calliandra californica*), Tree beargrass (*Nolina matapensis*), Slipper plant (*Pedilanthus macrocarpus*), Totem pole cactus (*Lophocereus schottii*) and Queen's wreath vine (*Antigonon leptopus*).

Nice specimens of Guayacán may be seen at the AZ-Sonora Desert Museum and Tohono Chul Park.



### Opportunities

#### Think you can't draw?

Andrew Rush is the director of Tucson's **Drawing Studio** on 6th Avenue downtown. I agree with his view that learning to draw yields more than techniques for putting things on paper. It develops observation skills that make the whole world look different. It is a life changing practice that anyone can undertake.

If you are of a mind that you cannot draw, I suggest taking a class with the Drawing Studio. It will dispel that notion in short order and you'll have a terrific time in doing so. See more about their offerings and events at [www.thedrawingstudio.org](http://www.thedrawingstudio.org).

Once you're hooked, look up **Richard Scott** in Pasadena. His workshops are directed primarily to designers and architects, but the "Sketching on Location" class is terrific for anyone wanting to expand his drawing skills. Richard is a patient, compassionate, and skilled teacher and is adept in many drawing and painting media. His sketching class on the Adriatic Coast in September of 2010 sounds amazing! See more at [www.graphicsteacher.com](http://www.graphicsteacher.com).

*(Sketch above: Susan Fehlow)*



### Other notes

#### In the next issue:

- Artwork for TPAC's annual tour
- Jamaica: delicious ruby-red drinks from hibiscus flowers
- Desert senna: a tough evergreen native with abundant yellow flowers
- Stone features for bird watering



#### Save this Date!

Tucson/Pima Arts Council's Open Studio Tour on November 14 and 15, 11 am to 5 pm. For information: <http://www.tucsonpimaartscouncil.org/news%20release.html>



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## GARDENING INSIGHTS - LANDSCAPE DESIGN AND ELEMENTS - "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 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)