



Gardening Insights

October - December 2016

Bird-friendly gardening

Maybe I'm just getting old and lazy, but I could sit for hours in a comfy chair with binoculars to watch birds. Seeing the antics of Gambel's Quails at a water hole or the family dynamics of Harris' Hawks on a raptor perch make my day. To improve the birding in my yard, I've added a few simple and inexpensive amenities that draw more species and make them easier to see. Here are some examples.

Dead trees are magnets for birds of all sizes but homeowners usually remove them from landscapes for safety or aesthetic reasons. **Raptor perches** are a good replacement and they consist simply of an upright post with a horizontal piece on top. They work best if at least 10' tall but the material they're made of doesn't seem to matter much. Some of mine are all wood and some are wood and steel; birds use them all. The one shown above left was inspired by ancient Korean "sotdae" - totems featuring stylized ducks that were erected in villages to bring luck and prosperity. I like that it combines garden sculpture with a bird habitat feature.

Bird houses are not used much by desert species, but Western Screech Owl, American Kestrel, Lucy's Warblers, and a few others use them occasionally. I followed Audubon Society specifications and made large houses out of old crates; they have been well received by Screech Owls. I made several smaller boxes hoping to entice warblers or flycatchers, but they have not been used at all, probably because ample Saguaro holes are available nearby. The photo above middle is a brood of owls that hatched this summer; they posed for a group photo in the afternoon, then disbursed the same evening. The parents left too, but are back now and use the houses for daytime roosting. Tucson Audubon has a program for making and monitoring bird boxes. You can find more at their website: TucsonAudubon.org

Water features are the surest way to draw in birds and other animals but it's important that the water be replaced frequently to avoid a buildup of pathogens that can spread from animal to animal. Basin-type features, like the one above, can be made to flush daily with an irrigation timer. These are good for birds and mammals like coyotes, foxes, and jackrabbits. The overflow is not wasted if it irrigates nearby plants. Smaller features can be made with a copper tube that slowly drips into a divot in a stone. The flow rate is controlled with a brass valve like those used in evaporative coolers. These features are used mostly by small birds and insects and are perfect for tiny gardens and patios.

Bird-friendly gardening (continued)

The amenities above greatly increase a garden's value for birds, but they're only part of the picture. Other elements of healthy bird habitat are trees, shrubs and other plants that provide food, cover, and nesting spaces. Keep in mind that, in general, local plants will suit local birds better than exotics. It's also important to layer plantings with tall trees above and shrubs, grasses, succulents, and ground covers below. There's not room here for details, but Tucson Audubon Society has valuable information on their website about local plant species and vegetative layering.



One bit of advice that might please the more “relaxed” gardener, is that cleanliness is not next to godliness when it comes to birds. A messy garden with dead plants, leaf litter, and piles of sticks and branches is ideal for foraging and will attract more numbers and species than a manicured space. If you can't stand to look at the “mess”, find a place to pile leaf litter that's out of your view but where Thrashers, Woodpeckers, Wrens, and others can still find their meals.



Tough but sweet: *Hyptis emoryi* - Desert Lavender

You learn to keep your hands to yourself in the desert: most everything is thorny or prickly and rewards even a light touch with a snake-like bite. A lovely exception is Desert Lavender, a tall gray shrub of the mint family that is covered with fuzzy, fragrant leaves that can be fondled without regret. It's often smelled before being seen and it can be found in rocky foothill areas of the Tucson mountain ranges. I've also seen it growing amongst boulders near Palm Springs and Death Valley, California. It's got to be tough to survive those places!



Photos: Stan Shebs via [commons.Wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org)

Desert Lavender is adaptable for landscape use in well-drained soils in warmer microclimates throughout the desert southwest. It's reported to be hardy to 15 degrees F., but it will freeze back somewhat in the low 20s. It re-sprouts well from the base and does best with a hard pruning every few years anyway. Most often it reaches 6' high and wide but can get as tall as 15' in optimum conditions, so it's a valuable specimen for screens, hedges, and wildlife plantings. The leaves and flowers have a long history of human use for teas and medicines, and the blooms, which occur mostly in winter and spring, are very attractive to butterflies, hummingbirds, and other pollinators. Thus, Desert Lavender is the perfect replacement for Oleander and other exotic hedge plants which have almost no value to native wildlife.

In gardens that include water harvesting basins, *Hyptis* will thrive without irrigation once it's established. Complementary plants include Creosote, Beargrass, Mallow, and Limberbush.



New gallery space

I've been wanting a place to show and photograph my work, so I spent a couple weeks refitting one of my outbuildings with plywood paneling and studio lights. My artwork pops against the stark white walls! I welcome visitors but give me a call to be sure I'm around. My place is on the Art Trails Open Studio on October 22 and 23 from 11 - 5. No need to phone then, just come by! I'm only fifteen minutes from downtown Tucson.



Simple firewood stack and/or lizard play-station

This firewood stacking system is inexpensive and requires no tools. It's made of two 16" x 8" cinder blocks and four 4' long 2x4s. The blocks are laid side-by-side long ways and the 2x4s are inserted into the block holes at an angle. The weight of the firewood holds it together - though it might not be considered "child-safe".

The design has been floating around on the web and we made this one with a friend in Portal, AZ. The wood stays off the ground and won't harbor rodents or snakes, but lizards find it irresistible. Pressure-treated 2x4s would limit termite problems where they're an issue.



Wind chimes: Amenity or Nuisance?

If gift shops called chimes what they really are - 24/7 random noise delivery devices - they'd probably sell fewer of them. But they are popular and I can't fault people enjoying the pleasant tinkling or the kinetic sculpture aspects. Others might not appreciate them, however, especially if they value birdsong or other natural sounds (or silence) more highly. My neighbor, who is over 500 feet away, has one that can drive me to distraction.

If you're considering the purchase or construction of wind chimes:

- Look for small, intimate works that can be heard from no more than 50 feet away.
- Place them where the sound is captured by patio walls or other structures.
- Buy the kinds made of wood or bamboo that have a gentle clacking sound instead of high, piercing sounds that travel long distances.
- Make sure the tubes or other resonators are tuned to pleasant complementary sounds.
- Check HOA rules to make sure they're allowed. Some HOAs forbid them.



Art Events, Classes, and Tours

It's stacking up to be a busy fall and winter with several art shows and other events. Here's a few things I'll be participating in and I hope you can join me!

"Revisions: Outside looking in" is a Tohono Chul Park gallery show featuring 30 artists whose work is intuitive, unusual, and uses recycled or repurposed materials. I have work indoors and kinetic pieces outdoors including the wind vane below. Tohono Chul Park, Tucson AZ August 25 through November 2, 2016.

Art Trails: West Tucson Open Studio Tour on October 22 and 23 from 11am to 5pm. Dozens of artists on the NW and West side of Tucson will have their studios open to the public. I will be open and might have a friend or two with me as well. My place is at 4200 N. Oxbow Road, just a mile west of Sweetwater and Silverbell.

Tucson Museum of Art Annual Artisans Market is on November 18, 19, and 20 from 10am - 5pm each day. This event features hundreds of local and SW artists in one place with food, music, and free museum passes.

Poets' Corner Art Sale is on Saturday, December 3 from 10am - 4pm. This is always a fun show with a couple dozen artists at a friend's house. 4221 E. Burns Street in midtown Tucson.

Tucson Iron and Metal Show and Sale is on Sunday, December 4 from 9am - 3pm. This event is held at a local scrapyard and about 15 artists show their work in recycled metal. Parking and access are easy and it's close to Tucson's Mexican restaurant row. So come by for art and then go find some great enchiladas!
690 E. 36th Street

"Shared Spaces: Creating habitat for humans and wildlife" This is a two day class I'm teaching with my friends Eli Nielsen and Andrew D'Arezzo of EcoSense Sustainable Landscapes. It's at Tohono Chul Park on Saturday, December 10 and 17 from 10am to noon each day. Contact Tohono Chul Park for registration info.

California Bloomin': The Botanical Gardens of Southern California and More is an art and garden tour of SoCal run by Tohono Chul Park and hosted by Lynn Hassler and me. We'll visit several botanical gardens plus museums, markets, and historic houses. March 29th to April 6th, 2017. Contact Tohono Chul Park for more information and pricing.



WANT HELP DESIGNING AN ECOLOGICAL GARDEN? Give me a call!

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