Desert Favorite  By Master Gardener Andrea Meckley

The Ocotillo (Fouquieria splendens) is one of the oddest and easiest plants to identify in the desert. This succulent has long unbranched spiny stems or canes that grow from a short trunk. Small leaves (3/4” to 1.5”) will grow from the canes when there is enough moisture. In spring, clusters of reddish orange tubular flowers one inch long bloom at the end of the canes attracting hummingbirds, bees, and insects. The flowers of the plant have been used to make tea and jelly. Native to the southern edge of our Mojave Desert, the Sonoran and Chihuahuan deserts, they are found in western Texas through to southern California. The Ocotillo is called many different names including Candlewood, Slimwood, Coachwhip, Vine Cactus, Flaming Sword and Jacob’s Staff. Areas such as rocky slopes, mesas, washes and desert grasslands are where you will find them growing in well-drained soil. These plants prefer full sun and are hardy to 10º F. There is much discussion on exactly how old Ocotillo can live. A good estimate is 60 years although some studies indicate they can live well over 100. Allow room when planting one because they can slowly grow to 15-20 ft H x 10-15 ft W. During drought the plant sheds its leaves to conserve moisture then after spring/summer rains the plant responds by leafing out within 48 hours, sometimes up to six or more times in a year. Transplanting an Ocotillo in southern Nevada takes extra dedication than most plants. Canes need to be sprayed often and watering is important to establish a (Continued on page 2)
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new root system that can pull up moisture. Information is available at the Cooperative Extension office. The Ocotillo canes can be cut and wired together and used as a living fence because its spines stop people and animals from passing through (pictured below). This plant has a long history of use among many Native Americans. The Cahuilla Indians used its flowers to make a summer drink and its seeds were pounded into a flour to make cakes. The Hualapai used the powdered roots in a footbath for swollen feet and the fibers of the plant to build huts. The Papago would press the nectar out of the blossom and allow it to dry into a candy like treat. The distinct structure and unique flowers from this plant add a special southwest touch to any landscape.
“You know you’re a Master Gardener if you’d rather go to a nursery to shop than a clothing store.”

November Reminders

1. Clean around fruit trees
2. Thin seedlings
3. Check roots for nematodes
4. Plant spring bulbs
5. Divide perennials
6. Don’t let weeds go to seed
7. Clean and store mower
8. Plant apricot and peach trees
9. Cut-back watering of trees and shrubs
10. Store sprayers in safe area
11. Prune dead branches out of trees and shrubs
12. Add mulch around trees and berries
13. Order seed catalogs
14. Prune ‘suckers’ from trees
15. Plant bare-root roses
16. Dethatch lawn
17. Remove green tomatoes
18. Plant a cover crop if not planting a winter garden
19. Don’t over-water or fungus will grow

Painting Your Garden with Color

Clark County Master Gardeners will offer a tour of the Demonstration Gardens located at the Lifelong Learning Center, 8050 Paradise Road, Las Vegas, NV 89123 (I-215 and Windmill Lane) on November 10. The tour is free and open to the public. Groups (5 or more people) are requested to call Ann Edmunds, Program Coordinator, at 257-5587 at least two weeks in advance.

Volunteer Master Gardeners will discuss desert adapted plants which can be successfully grown in the home landscape. The Demonstration Gardens contain over 500 species of desert-appropriate landscape plants, including: trees, shrubs, perennials, palms, cacti and agaves. Plants are identified by botanical and common names. In addition to scheduled tours, the grounds are open for self-guided walk-a-bouts on weekdays from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Veggies by the Season

Veggies by the Season is a series of year round, month-by-month gardening classes designed to educate people on producing timely vegetables in their back-yard gardens.

Winter

Nov. 07 – Critter Control and Companion Planting
Nov. 28 – Planning your garden, raised beds, soil sampling
Dec. 12 – Vegetable seeds and plants
Dec. 19 – Soil Improvements
Jan. 09 – Season Extension
Jan. 23 – Bare Root Fruit and Nut Trees
Feb. 13 – Plant Grown Regulators and Tomato Plants
Feb. 27 Pruning and Tool Care

$5.00 each or $25 for all

For more information call Denise at 702-397-2604 x 4
Growing Wildflowers in the Sonoran Desert

http://www.azfcf.org

Nature evolved desert plants with unique characteristics to survive and thrive in our desert. A wet winter can result in a spectacular natural wildflower display the following spring. The right mix of temperatures and regular watering magically awaken and nurture long dormant wildflower seeds.

Michelle Rauscher, the horticulturist in charge of the desert wildflower beds at the Phoenix Botanical Garden, generously shared her experiences using nursery industry expertise with fertilizers, chemicals, and traditional gardening techniques. These practices worked against her goal of wildflower propagation.

Like many new desert gardeners, she learned the hard way that disturbing the desert’s fragile crust by tilling the soil before sowing seeds stimulated dormant weed seeds to burst forth and out-compete her wildflowers. Instead of delightful wildflower beds, she had fields of the most invasive and aggressive weeds. It took her about five years of weeding by hand to finally eradicate those prolific weeds.

Another miscalculation involved using fertilizers that resulted in very large, very green plants that produced very few blooms. Many common nursery practices were developed to grow exotic plants not native to our desert soil.

Mid-October on through early December is the best time to seed for our spring desert flowers. Tilling the soil is necessary only if the ground has been compacted such as when construction vehicles drive over it. Michelle lightly rakes or crumbles about one inch of the ground so that the seeds can get into the soil. She does recommend leveling the bed so that seeds grow evenly and don’t puddle with watering. She just presses the seeds in. She does not dig or bury the seeds. She tries to imitate nature.

Most desert wildflower seeds are very small so she mixes them with sand (or soil) in a container that she marks with a halfway indicator so that all the seeds don’t end up in one area. She suggests sowing seeds in your already irrigated areas. It’s less expensive and less work. Look for the wet areas in your drip irrigation and sow the seeds there.

The key to successful germination is to keep the soil moist until the seedlings emerge. How often to water depends on many factors including soil content, sun exposure,
temperature, rainfall, etc. She recommends monitoring each location. Some may need sprinkling twice a day, others once every two days.

Another key factor is to protect seeds and seedlings from being the local wildlife grocery store. Chicken wire enclosures with bird netting (sometimes called tree netting) on top need to be secured tightly so that critters can’t be caught inside the enclosed area. Don’t bunch the netting on the ground where it’s like a magnet for lizards and snakes who cannot escape becoming entangled in it. The white frost cloth that lets sunshine in also is a good alternative.

A beautiful wildflower bed is a joy to experience. But it takes a lot of work until established. Michelle cautions that it takes three to five years to establish a field of wildflowers and it takes a lot of hand thinning and weeding. She recommends starting a small area close to where you relax in your garden. Pick out some good perennials and make them your mainstay so that every year you’ll have brilliant blooms. Pick some with foliage that remains attractive all year.

Look to nature and your own neighborhood to see what grows where. The Cooperative Extension office has many great demonstration beds with many shrubs that you can view throughout the year to see what the seasons can show. Copy nature: ask neighbors for seeds from plants they have that you like. Research and understand what you are bringing into the ecosystem. Select seed packets of Sonoran wildflowers native to our area. Michelle prefers to mix her seed selections herself instead of using packaged mixes. She urges home gardeners to collect and save seeds for next year. Cutting off dead plants at their base instead of pulling them up is another tip. And please don’t use a hoe or next year you’ll have twice as many weeds.
A note from Denise

Cheer-up the drab days of winter with large, colorful flowers!

If you haven’t already, it’s time to replace summer flowers with winter-hardy flowers for seasonal color. Pansies are the top choice for blooming bedding plants at this time of year. They’re hardy, will bloom over a very long season, and come in a wide array of colors. Miniature pansies are also popular, as well as the old fashioned viola and Johnny Jump-Ups, which are ideal for small beds seen up-close. Combine pansies with spring bulbs, plant in front of hedges, or in mass in strategically placed pockets for increased visual impact.

Other bedding plants to choose from now include snapdragons, calendula, ornamental kale & cabbage, pinks, dianthus, sweet William, candytuft, diascia (twinspur), linaria and erysimum (wallflower).

Some spring wildflowers can still be sown from seed in early November, including bluebonnets, Drummond phlox, rudbeckia and coreopsis. Sow into a bare, prepared soil; very lightly cover with soil, and water immediately to initiate germination. If you plan on sowing into an area covered with grass or weeds, first cut the vegetation very short, then rake up as much as you can, so seeds can make it to the exposed soil.

Did you buy some bulbs this fall? Narcissus and daffodils need to get into the ground soon, but tulips should be chilled in the refrigerator for at least 45 days before planting.

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