

Around My Desert Garden

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JUNE 30, 2008 With many days over 110°F and no rain for a long time, there is still some color in the yard. Red birds are flowering (especially in some shade) along with *Acacia millifolia* with its 2 inch long cream-colored spikes and San Carlos hibiscus (*Gossypium harknessii*), yellow flowers on a leafy bush. Since the last article (May 12) there were lots of flowers including *Acacia aneura*, *Cordia boissieri*, Mexican bird (*Caesalpinia pulcherrima*), Texas ebony (*Ebenopsis ebano*), Desert willow (*Chilopsis linearis*), Ironwood (*Olneya tesota*), Yellow Jacaranda (*Tipuana tipu*), and Mexican palo verde (*Parkinsonia aculeata*). If you've never seen the Arizona Smoke Tree (*Psoralea argemone*) in flower, you want to ... there are a couple in the Goldwater Memorial on the corner of Tatum and Lincoln that looked great on June 20. A *Ceiba* (*C. aesculifolia*) started leafing out very slowly in May. Most of that gave up after an extended heat spell and it looks like the time has come to replace it with something that actually grows here. On the plus side, a small *Dracaena draco*, which was seriously damaged by last year's hard freeze, is finally coming back. But the place to see this striking plant is coastal Southern California - it struggles here.

Most of the large cactus are flowering now and not all of the flowers are white. *Cereus huntingtoniana* has an unusual angular appearance, with large white flowers with red sepals. *Cereus aethiops* from northern Argentina is also a little different and worth having. You've seen large *Stetsonia coryne* at the Desert Botanical Garden but it looks good at all sizes and flowers at about 6 ft. Ferocacti flowering now include *F. schwarzii*, *F. gracilis* (Baja fire barrel), *F. rectispinus*, *F. cylindraceus*, and *F. stainesii*. While cactus and barrels are the main source of flowers now, there is also some color from notocacti, astrophytums and *Matucana madisoniorum* (bright orange-red).

Some of the smaller aloes flowering recently include the dark green *A. nobilis* (red) and *A. brevifolia*, which forms a nice ground cover in milder climates. *Aloe rauhii* (from Madagascar) and *A. sladeniana* (from Namibia) do well here. *Aloe pirottae* continues to flower and one of the best mid-sized aloes, *A. karasbergensis*, is getting started. A large aloe with recurved, snake-like leaves has finally been identified (I hope). Purchased as an unlabeled clearance item from Home Depot years ago, the plants have gotten large and stayed single in shade under desert trees. With good red flower spikes in spring it is probably *A. vanbalenii* from eastern South Africa, an area without frosts. But these plants endured the hard freeze last winter without damage while many other aloes were affected. The books say this plant will develop a coppery-red color in sun - time to find out!

A small cluster of golden barrels (*Echinocactus grusonii*) was brought back from the San Diego CSS sale in early June. Left in a tree shaded location it nevertheless got about an hour of late afternoon direct sun on a hot day and it sunburned. That's right, a spine covered cactus sunburned with just brief exposure. Of course in San Diego it was "comfortable" with maximum temperatures below 80°F, often overcast days and maybe even grown in the shade. This little episode reminded me that the first of these articles had some comments about temperatures of soil in 1 gallon black plastic pots here in summer. That is,

even if you bought the plant here, where you place the pot and how you water it can quickly lead to problems or disaster. If the usual 1 gallon black plastic pot that lots of succulents are sold in are inadvertently set down in full sun, the temperature for dry soil can go substantially higher than the air temperature (for example, more than 130°F on a 110°F day). The plants' roots can't withstand these extreme temperatures for very long. If you brought the plant home from a nursery the day before, it was probably wet but will totally dry out in a day or two. While wet, the soil temperature will mostly lag below the air temperature. When you do water the pot try to saturate the soil; just a little bit of water added to very hot soil will tend to "steam" the roots. So it is probably best to set the pot in a shaded spot where the dry soil temperature won't be much different than air temperature and you won't need to water every day.

If you are new to collecting cacti and other succulents the variety of names for a given plant can be frustrating. For example, in "Cacti" by Vening (one of the first books I had) the Arizona organ pipe was *Cereus thurberi*. Borg's "Cacti" (one of the early comprehensive books) had it as *Lemaireocereus thurberi*. In a good picture book by Innes and Glass it is *Stenocereus thurberi* (There were no *Stenocereus* in Borg). The other large organ pipe like cactus native to south western Arizona is the Senita. It was *Cereus schottii* in Vening, *Lophocereus schottii* in Borg and *Pachycereus schottii* in Innes and Glass. So to some degree, the name you learn will depend on the book you use, or what someone tells you it is, or just the common name or local trade name. As you get to know the plants, you will see the similarities and identification will get easier. The examples here are simple ones. Some people keep up with the latest nomenclature...others don't. Get some books you like and learn the botanical names for your favorite plants - it will help.

CACTI F.D. Vening 1974

CACTI J. Borg 1951

THE ILLUSTRATED ENCYCLOPEDIA OF CACTI C. Innes & C. Glass 1991