

Around My Desert Garden

By Bob Torrest

February 2008

After the good soaking rains in January now everything looks great. Creosote bushes have been growing rapidly and flowering for some time. Brittlebush (*Encelia farinosa*) has never looked better and is covered with bright yellow daisies. All the Opuntias have filled out with “Beavertails” (*O. basilaris*) flowering now. *O. aciculata* (“Cowboy’s whiskers”) and *O. rufida* (“the blind pear of the Big Bend”) are loaded with flower buds and many Echinocereus and Mammillarias are flowering now.

Several varieties of Cassias have been flowering for some time and have been joined by yellow bells, Mexican bird (*Caesalpinia mexicana*), Ruellia and *Calliandra californica*, solanum and blue hibiscus. A small *Cordia boissieri* is loaded with large white flowers at only 4 feet and will eventually make a very ornamental small tree. *Coursetia glandulosa* (Baby bonnets) is a large shrub with pea shaped white, yellow and pink flowers. Of course, the perennials including salvias, mallows, penstemmons, chuparosa, Coulter’s hibiscus and desert senna always brighten the garden now. Flowering trees include *Eucalyptus torquata* (Coral flowered gum), *Acacia saligna* with branch tips of yellow ball shaped flowers, pomegranates, sweet acacia, Palo blanco (*Acacia willardiana*), China berry (*Melia azedarach*) with lavender flowers, Golden ball lead tree (*Leucaena retusa*) and Mescal bean (*Sophora secundiflora*) with clusters of purple scented flowers. The brief display of the Chilean palo verde-Chanar (*Geoffroea decorticans*) with its bright golden yellow flowers was, as usual, over too soon.

The very colorful long lasting dense flowers of *Aloe cryptopoda* began in mid-July (the leaves are *grayish green, not dark green as previous described). *A. longistyla* is a small plant with an unusually large flower on a short stalk and it and all the others mentioned here were outdoors all winter. Flowering continued for *A. branddraaiensis* and *A. pirottae*. The single dense red spike of *A. aculeata* was open by mid February when *A. vaombe*, *A. variegata*, *A. striata* and Crosby’s prolific were all flowering along with *A. globuligemma* and *A. arborescens*. *Aloe arborescens* had some minor damage from the hard freeze last year and only the plant close to a south facing stucco wall managed to flower (this one had no freeze damage). By the end of February *A. zebrina*, *A. sinkatana*, *A. vacillans* (larger), *A. spinosissima* and hybrids of *A. dorotheae* and a variegata-saponaria cross were also flowering. Aloes lost after the hard freeze of 2007 were mentioned in prior articles. *A. kedongensis* (a small shrub) has been in decline since then and an *A. suprafoliata* finally gave up, as has a hybrid *A. divaricata*. *A. mcloughlinii* was lost in several locations but a few managed to survive and are coming back now. This variety did well for years in both full sun and partial shade. *A. wickensii* is a brightly bi-colored form of *A. cryptopoda* with red and yellow racemes. The current Cactus and Succulent Journal has a photo of *A. lutescens* and describes the differences with *A. cryptopoda*. It is one of the ISI offerings as is *A. zebrina* and *A. aculeata*.

A couple of years ago an article described the results of 20 years of growth for some of the columnar cacti. *Pachycereus pecten-arboriginum* was 10 ft with 4 arms then and is now 12 ft with 5 larger arms between 4 and 7 feet. *Neocardenasia herzogiana* was 6 ft and is now over 8 ft in full sun. The only Cardon (*Pachycereus pringlei*) with arms is the only one that had hard freeze damage at the top at 8 ft in 2007. The others are much taller. The tallest Cardon grande (*Trichocereus terscheckii*) at 13 ft with arms at 4 and 6 ft hasn't gotten any taller in 2 years but has filled out. *A. Neobuxbaumia tetetzo* is up to 10 ft but still just a single column. Several large columnars that do well here but are rarely seen are *Escontria chiotilla*, several of which are up to 8 ft with arms at 2 to 3 ft, *Pachycereus weberi* which has added several feet in morning shade to reach 10 ft but with no arms yet, and *Stenocereus dumortieri* which, at 10 ft., has arms at 1 and 3 ft.

The review of David Yetman's "The Great Cacti: Ethnobotany and Biogeography" in the current issue of the Cactus and Succulent Journal ends with the reminder that "columnar cacti have traditionally held far more importance in human endeavors" **than "the more precious pot friendly types." Try some if you can even if they must be in pots. The *Pilosocereus* described in the current C & SJ is one that will do well in pots for years, as will Arizona organ-pipes and several others.