

Fouquieriaceae

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This is a small North American plant family with only one genus, *Fouquieria*, containing only 15 species. All but one are medium to large deciduous shrubs, leafing out at any time when rain is available, then going dormant during dry weather. They tend to bloom once per year, unlike our ocotillo, *F. splendens*, which was named by Georg Engelmann after his visit to our area on the Boundary Expedition in the 1840's. *F. splendens* occurs from Texas through California and south into Mexico. The other species occur in Mexico; most have short trunks, branches and are not as tall as the ocotillo.

The family is recognized by the flowers. These are borne in terminal clusters and are tubular, with stamens protruding a good way past the tube. Most species have red or yellow flowers. They are considered adaptations for hummingbird pollination, which is certainly the case with the ocotillo.

The glorious exception is *F. columnaris*—the boojum tree. At one time segregated into its own genus, *Idria*. Botanists now consider it not different enough in floral structure to justify this separation. You can leave *Idria* on your labels; everybody knows this name.

The boojum grows in mid-Baja, California beginning about 10 miles inland. Drive south to El Rosario and turn left. Soon you will be amazed. It experiences hot days, but not our hot nights. Winter and spring fogs are frequent. Almost all the rain falls in the cooler winter. It is not easy to grow here in the low desert; our hot summer nights coupled with summer rains induce rot quite easily. Just a thousand feet higher, in Cave Creek or at the Boyce Thompson Arboretum in Superior, they grow much more easily. The trick in cultivation in Phoenix seems to be extremely well-draining soil (ensuring dormancy during the heat of the summer) and adequate winter watering when they make most of their growth. Seedlings will need careful watering all summer or they will dry completely. That said, Richard Lahti, of Arizona Riches nursery (602-569-0614), waters his all year, and gets more yearly growth than I thought possible. His property is several hundred feet higher than central Phoenix, and is well north of town, so cooler at night.

The other species come from areas with summer rain and grow during warm weather. None are as frost-hardy as the ocotillo. Though some of us are using them as landscape plants, especially *F. diguetii* and *F. macdougallii*, we will be worrying about them during the next deep freeze. All the summer growers do well in pots and are often seen trained as fat-trunked bonsai specimens. None are difficult to grow, but they are seldom seen since they are not often sold. This often translates into a high price. Water them during warm weather and let them almost dry. If you forget, the plant will drop its leaves, but will grow them back after the next watering. These are slow-growing plants, however, and I prefer not to let them stop growing even temporarily from lack of summer water. I don't give my *F. macdougallii* planted in the ground any supplemental watering during the winter. It blooms nicely in the spring. I bought this plant at a DBG plant sale.

They are not hard to grow from seed, but grow slowly. Seedling, even boojums, should not dry out completely during hot weather, but should not be kept continually wet either. Cuttings will root with varying difficulty between the species. Nobody gets 100% rooting with cuttings. The best method seems to be to dip the bottom end in rooting hormone, let dry a day or so, and set the cut end just below the surface of sand kept barely damp. Spray the tops with water daily. Take cuttings during warm weather. The cuttings will leaf out before they will root, so don't be in a hurry to transplant.

Jim Elliott, club member and owner of Arizona Cactus Sales in Chandler (480-963-1061 or online: <http://www.arizonacactussales.com/>), has transplanted many ocotillos. He says for the best results to plant them at the same level as they previously grew, and to not water at the roots for 30 days, but to spray with tops with water from a hose daily, until they resume tip growth. A little water will run down to the roots, but the root zone should not be soaked. They will leaf out before resuming tip growth, so keep up the spraying until stems elongate a little. Once growth has resumed they can be flooded every two weeks or so.