

My Cactus & Succulent Filled Life...

By Daniel Sumberg

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I enjoyed Joan Skirvin and Cynthia Robinson's stories so much that I have been inspired to share my story, which would be more aptly be named, "My Plant Filled Life."

I think the plant "bug" first hit me when I put a dry lima bean in a wet paper towel in kindergarten and witnessed the miracle of germination. Growing up in South Florida, I was fortunate to have a neighbor who had a large greenhouse in his back yard. I visited this wheelchair-bound man often as a boy and watched him pot and care for a wide variety of plants. As a teenager I worked at a plant nursery after school and became fascinated with tropical plants, especially exotic fruits. It's amazing how quickly a papaya seed will become an eight foot tall fruit-bearing tree.

After leaving Florida in 1972, I spent two years in Tennessee and one in Israel farming. When I say farming, I mean row crop farming, like wheat, corn, soybeans and cotton. I still remember the thrill of starting with a rough field and going through the various steps of tillage and ending up with a crop. Not necessarily worth more than the costs of production, but a crop nonetheless.

I lived in Wisconsin for six years in the late 70's and early 80's. Every year I grew vegetable gardens and loved landscaping with the plants that thrived up there. Two years ago, I visited my daughter in Madison and went by the home I lived in, in the early 80's. The Norway Spruces I planted back then from one gallon pots were 30 feet tall and the Colorado Blue Spruces were close to 20!

My years in North Carolina from the early 80's until moving to Arizona in 2001 brought more gardening. I built raised beds with solid wooden planking between the rows. Out east it's all about weed control. In 1985 my wife and I considered going into the container plant business. Our research took us to Long Island, NY, where we visited operations ranging from low tech perennial hoop houses to capital intensive annual greenhouses. Our conclusion—it would be difficult to make a living competing with the big growers, and we would probably lose our love for plants as they would become units in a mass production process. If anyone has figured this one out, let me know. My love for landscaping continued and I was able to salvage hundreds of containers from a nursery that went out of business. Everywhere we traveled, from San Francisco to England, we would seek out arboretums and botanical gardens. I developed a love of Japanese Zen gardens and the art of Bonsai. My Zen garden featured a weeping blue atlas cedar trailing along a structure made of large timbers, San Jose junipers, and stones. My favorite bonsai was an azalea that stayed outdoors on the north side of the house in all weather except the few nights the mercury went below the low 20's. It was a showy plant. Every May it was so covered in pink blooms you couldn't see the foliage. Unfortunately, I was ill-advised and brought it to Phoenix. It didn't stand a chance.

Now that I have become a desert creature, I have fallen in love with cacti and succulents. When I stood up and introduced myself at the January 2005 CACSS meeting and answered Lee's question, "What is your plant interest?" I simply said cacti. Well, that was then. Now I find myself appreciating so many more plants from agaves and aloes to euphorbias and more. I have landscaped my newly remodeled home with many rescued as well as purchased plants, and am building a collection of potted plants under my newly constructed 60% shade-cloth area. It's all been great fun.