

Plants of the Southwest has been a fixture among weird- and xeric-plant aficionados since 1985. Owned and operated by the husband and wife team of Gene Josephs and Jane Evans, the nursery carries a dazzling array of cacti, succulents, and herbaceous desert plants. In 1987, the pair

Plants of the Southwest

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acquired an extensive collection of living stones (*Lithops* spp.), around which they built their other business, the mail-order Living Stones Nursery. Josephs and Evans are noted plant explorers, too, and often provide the last word on the taxonomy of any given strange plant.

Southwest

BY SCOTT CALHOUN / Tucson, Arizona, USDA Zone 10



Ocotillo Loco

The ocotillo (*Fouquieria splendens*) has become the darling of Southwestern gardeners shooting for a bold look. We love its upright architectural structure, the zigzag lightning of its branching pattern, and the flaming orange-red of its flowers, which lure hummingbirds north out of Mexico in the spring. The adaptations this wild plant has made in response to extreme weather make it all the more interesting in the garden—where it has proven its worth as both a focal point and as a functional design element.

The ocotillo is so micro-attuned to its

environment that it alternately leafs out and goes deciduous five or six times a year, which to my mind makes it at least five or six times more interesting than a normal tree. During drought, the ocotillo looks electrocuted. But within 24 hours of a rain storm, it produces new leaves, which cover its gray skeleton with a thick green fur. These fast and strange changes make the ocotillo a much-loved accent plant among desert gardeners.

The ocotillo is a working plant, too. Before the age of ornamental gardening, Mexican and American Indians stuck cut ocotillo canes in the ground to corral livestock and poultry. The canes, which often took root and grew, formed haywire fences that gardeners today find irresistible as trellises, shrines, and plain old space dividers. With their fiery red flowers and twisting canes, ocotillos make some of the most distinctive living fences imaginable. In my own garden, I have used these fences both as enclosure and ornament.

Ocotillos' bold character is a constant pleasure. The only thing keeping more gardeners from planting one might be lack of space. The plant's candelabra-like form can have as many as 100 thin stems, and it spreads to a considerable width. Happily, one pioneering Tucson landscape designer, Greg Corman, has found a solution to the puzzle of fitting an ocotillo into a tight spot.

Prompted by a design challenge, Corman pruned and arranged an ocotillo's stems in a fanlike pattern and attached the branches to a powder-coated steel trellis, creating an espalier. "We had a narrow area behind a client's spa that

called for a stark, dramatic look that wasn't too 'pretty,'" says Corman. "I thought that a fanned-out ocotillo would be perfect." The espalier has restricted the width of the plant while showcasing the tracery of its branches, and casting interesting shadows on an otherwise unremarkable cement wall. **H**

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There is the dark side to the ocotillo's horticultural history: the traditional method of harvesting the wild plants for market. The plants are ripped out of



the west Texas desert, stacked bare-root on cattle trucks, and shipped to Arizona. Only around half survive the move. So many ocotillos have been displaced that it is rumored that hummingbirds' migration patterns are changing.

As a former garden center manager who has seen too many bare-root ocotillos die, I advise gardeners to only buy seed grown containerized plants, which are now widely available. They're a more environmentally responsible choice—and they are guaranteed to survive.