

Places to Visit

Desert Living Courtyard and Barrio Garden

Tohono Chul Park
7366 North Paseo Del Norte
Tucson, Arizona
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www.tohonochohulpark.org

An eclectic and traditionally Latino gardening style, the *barrio* (neighborhood) garden, which combines edible plants, bright colors, found objects, and shrines, has made its way into mainstream Southwest gardening culture. A new public garden at Tohono Chul Park shows off some of the *barrio* garden's charms.

The *barrio* garden is one of 10 new micro-gardens that make up the just-dedicated Desert Living Courtyard. Designer Jeffrey Trent provides a good overview of the *barrio* style and shows how it can be implemented in a small space. Surrounded by rusted iron and adobe walls, the *barrio* garden is home to cactus and agaves, citrus, pomegranates, herbs, unconventional containers, and a shrine.

Southwest BY SCOTT CALHOUN / Tucson, Arizona, USDA Zone 10



Divine Shrines

When I think about what defines Southwest style in our gardens, I usually think about succulent plants with bold shapes, seasonal wildflowers, or rocky arroyos, but lately I've had my mind on a more mysterious garden element: the shrine. If you think shrines are only for somber religious reflection, think again. In the modern Southwest, you are as likely to find a shrine dedicated to Elvis as to St. Francis. In Tucson, we have a tradition of nontraditional shrines.

The most notorious public shrine, El Tiradito, is dedicated to a sinner caught in a love triangle. Located near downtown Tucson, it consists of a crumbling U-shaped adobe wall and has the aura of a ruin. Among other things, this shrine has evolved into a place for mothers to light candles for wayward daughters. On warm summer evenings, there are many mothers with votives in hand visiting El Tiradito.

In the humorous category, the shrine at Tucson Botanical Gardens stands out, particularly as *Los Días de los Muertos* (Days of the

Dead) approach. Held on November 1 and 2, this festival joyfully celebrates loved ones who have passed away. Homes and gardens are decorated with fruit, cut flowers, and costumed skeleton figures. Toward the end of October, bride and groom skeleton figures, in gown and tuxedo, appear at the botanical garden shrine. The couple takes a good-natured sideways glance at more traditional skeletons, which are made of papier-maché—

this pair has plastic milk jug heads.

Shrines are fun projects for gardeners at home, too. There are no set boundaries when it comes to designing one. Cobbled together from wood, brick, steel, or stone, they can serve as an intensely personal garden statement. Noted Arizona nurserywoman Janet Rademacher takes great liberties with the whole concept in her mesquite-shaded backyard; one of her memorials is a tiled alcove formed by a half-buried cast-iron bathtub studded with beer bottle tops and surrounded by an arc of vintage Volkswagen hubcaps. "I found the hubcaps in Texas and had them brought back to Phoenix on one of our nursery trucks," she says. Adjacent to her bathtub and hubcap affair sits another shrine of sorts, this one composed of bullet hole-ridged propane tanks guarded by an armed bandito statuette. "It's not junk, it's *junque*," says Rademacher.

In my own garden, I've created a small memorial to dirt, assembled with worn-out rakes, shovels, jackhammer bits, and potted torch cacti. It seemed only appropriate to

decorate a shrine dedicated to hardpan with gardening implements that had been defeated by it. Yes, my dirt is a tough mistress that I battle with a pick and jackhammer, but I'm hoping that my little tribute to her will make for a more harmonious gardening future. ■

WORTH GROWING

San Marcos hibiscus, *Gossypium harknessii*



San Marcos hibiscus is a wonderfully tough shrub in the cotton family that is maddeningly hard to find in nurseries. Among the best heat-tolerant plants for the low desert, it thrives even when subjected to blazing south and west exposures. Because its native range is in Baja California, near beaches, it is salt tolerant as well. The three by three-foot plant's three-inch-wide lemon-yellow flowers appear May through October and nicely complement its heart-shaped glossy leaves. Sources, page 92.