

Better Homes and Gardens Special Interest Publications.

# Nature's GARDEN

Premier Issue

Create a  
**Backyard Haven**

For Birds and Butterflies



Plant a  
**Butterfly Banquet**  
In a Window Box

**Native Plants**

- Reliable
- Colorful
- Easy

**Shutterbugs!**  
Send Us  
Your Best  
**PHOTOS**  
See Page 50

Spring 2007

Deliver to: April 17

[www.bhg.com](http://www.bhg.com)





Returning  
**HOME**  
to Nature

A fourth-generation Arizonan shares his secrets to working with—not against—the dry climate in his personal paradise.

WRITTEN BY SCOTT CALHOUN  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY AMY HASKELL



OPPOSITE: Friendly neighbors. Sanjo welcomes visitors to the California Sonoran Adobe bungalow, soft-tile awnings (Archie) & a chair that flank the door. THIS PHOTO: The backyard water stream recycled mirrored stools, a steel rain pipe that anchors a stone of Queen's Wreath (Aurigaean leprosus, B&B Seed) and recycled Mexican fired adobe covers.

A

s a boy growing up in the Sonoran Desert, I fell in love with the otherworldly geometry of desert plants. When my father took me hiking in the Superstition Mountains of Arizona, I fixated on the peculiarities of arid flora: the lime-green palo verde tree trunks, the purple pads of the Santa Rita prickly pear cactus, and the curved barbs and dead-reckoning of the compass barrel. For me, the desert was full of plants begging to be grown in residential gardens that were mostly Bermudagrass.

By the time I moved my own family back to where I was born, there had been a gardening revolution. Landscape designers were using native desert plants en masse. I was thrilled and began dreaming of my own Southwest home, garden, and garden-design business. I built an adobe house that I call my Sonoran bungalow. As I looked at the architectural style of the house and the beaten dirt lot surrounding it, the yard called out for a desert cottage garden. My family and I wanted a garden both ordered and wild, a kind of English-Sonoran hybrid.



**LEFT:** Dairde, Zoe, and Scott Calhoun (from left) enjoy Arizona evenings in their patio alcove. **THIS PHOTO:** Fire barrel cactus quintuplets (*Forocactus pringlei*) in zinc-painted pots sit atop a courtyard wall and display the house numbers of the Calhouns' bungalow.





This rainwater cistern holds 422 gallons of water. Over the course of a year, it can collect up to 3,500 gallons of water for the garden. A potted soft-tipped agave punctuates the setting.





**OPPOSITE:** Slipper plant (*Porolithos macrocarpus*), freckler penstemon (*Penstemon cottonii*), and Queen Victoria agave (*Agave victoriae-reginae*) thrive in the desert.

**OPPOSITE INSET:** A hummingbird sips nectar from freckler penstemon (*Penstemon cottonii*) in the courtyard garden.

**ABOVE:** Lemon sundrops (*Calylophus hartwegii*), dinner plate prickly pear (*Opuntia robusta*), and spiky agaves fill the front yard.

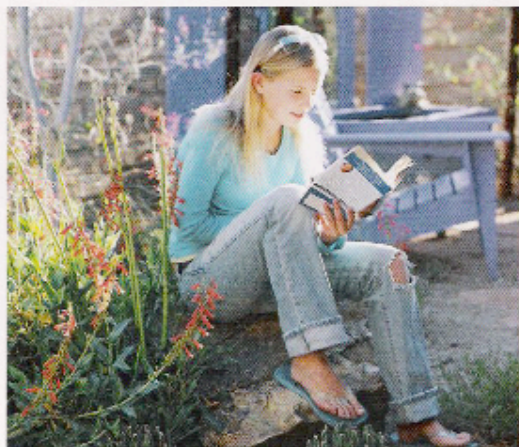
**LEFT:** Surrounded by Mexican feathergrass (*Nassella tenuissima*), artichoke agave (*Agave parryi* var. *truncata*) makes a dramatic statement in its bold red pot.

**BELOW:** Zoo enjoys private time in the garden with one of her favorite books.

**BOTTOM:** A whimsical bottle cap centipede climbs the steel ramada.

To make a garden in such an arid climate, you don't need a pedigree, just a shovel, pick ... or jackhammer. One of the big challenges in the Southwest is the soil, which may range from post dirt to rock. Because permanently changing the composition of your soil is almost impossible, the best (and only) tactic is to work with it. The most important lesson I've learned while making Southwest gardens is to plant what thrives. Isn't it easier to learn to live in harmony with your own garden landscape than to fight it? 🌱

See Resources on page 108.



## Arid Garden Advice

### • Trees are umbrellas.

Desert trees are multifunctional and usually grow wider than tall. Avoid shaping your trees into lollipops; these beauties are meant to look twisted and rugged. A few of the best desert trees for the home garden are velvet mesquite (*Prosopis juliflora*), desert ironwood (*Olneya tesota*), fanthill palm fern (*Parkinsonia microphylla*), Desert Museum palo verde (*Parkinsonia x 'Desert Museum'*), desert willow (*Chiosopsis linearis*), and sweet acacia (*Acacia farnesiana*).

### • Succulents are the backbone.

Southwest owners may not be exciting and green, but when it comes to cactus and succulents, they rule. Use plants such as agaves, hesperaloes, barrel cactus, and Mexican fencepost cactus as living outdoor sculptures in your garden. Because these plants are evergreen and drought-tolerant and have interesting flowers, they should be used abundantly in desert yards. Avoid planting just one of each species; instead, cluster three, five, seven, or more of the same species of plant.

### • Wildflowers are seasonal jewelry.

Shoot for two big flower explosions per year. Because the Sonoran Desert has two main bloom seasons—spring and late summer—planting wildflowers that are adapted to those seasons means you'll have two peaks to look forward to. The smaller desert ephemeral plants (wildflowers) are water-wise and go dormant during dry seasons. In fall, I sow the seeds of my favorites—a mix of arroyo lupine, desert bluebells, brittlebush, Mexican gold poppies, and several



A covey of Gambel's quail shares the Calhouns' front yard desert garden.

penstemons—that sprout and grow over the cool winter months. By spring, my yard is a river of cantian blue, hot pink, and screaming yellow—an ephemeral crescendo that I relish. By June, I'm preparing for the summer rains. My summer wildflower mix includes Arizona poppies, desert annie, devil's claws, golden dogbane, firewheel, and Gooding's verbena.

• *Vines are drapery.*

With the small size of a tiny yard, using trellises and vines for verticality is a necessary trade. Vines on the south and west side of a home can dramatically reduce summer cooling bills. Three of the best desert vines are twining snapdragon vine (*Mourouya antiochiensis*), yellow morning glory vine (*Momempis aurea*), and Owan's Wreath 'Baja Red' (*Antigonon leptopus* 'Baja Red').

• *Embrace local geology.*

In a desert garden, rocks are your friends. To make boulders look naturally placed, bury one-third of the rock below grade. For mulches, I like to use decomposed granite of 1/4-inch pieces or smaller. This fine granite also makes attractive pathways and is a good seedbed for wildflowers.



ABOVE: The curvilinear patio provides year-round opportunities for dining and conversation beside a pair of massive Weber's agaves (*Agave weberi*).