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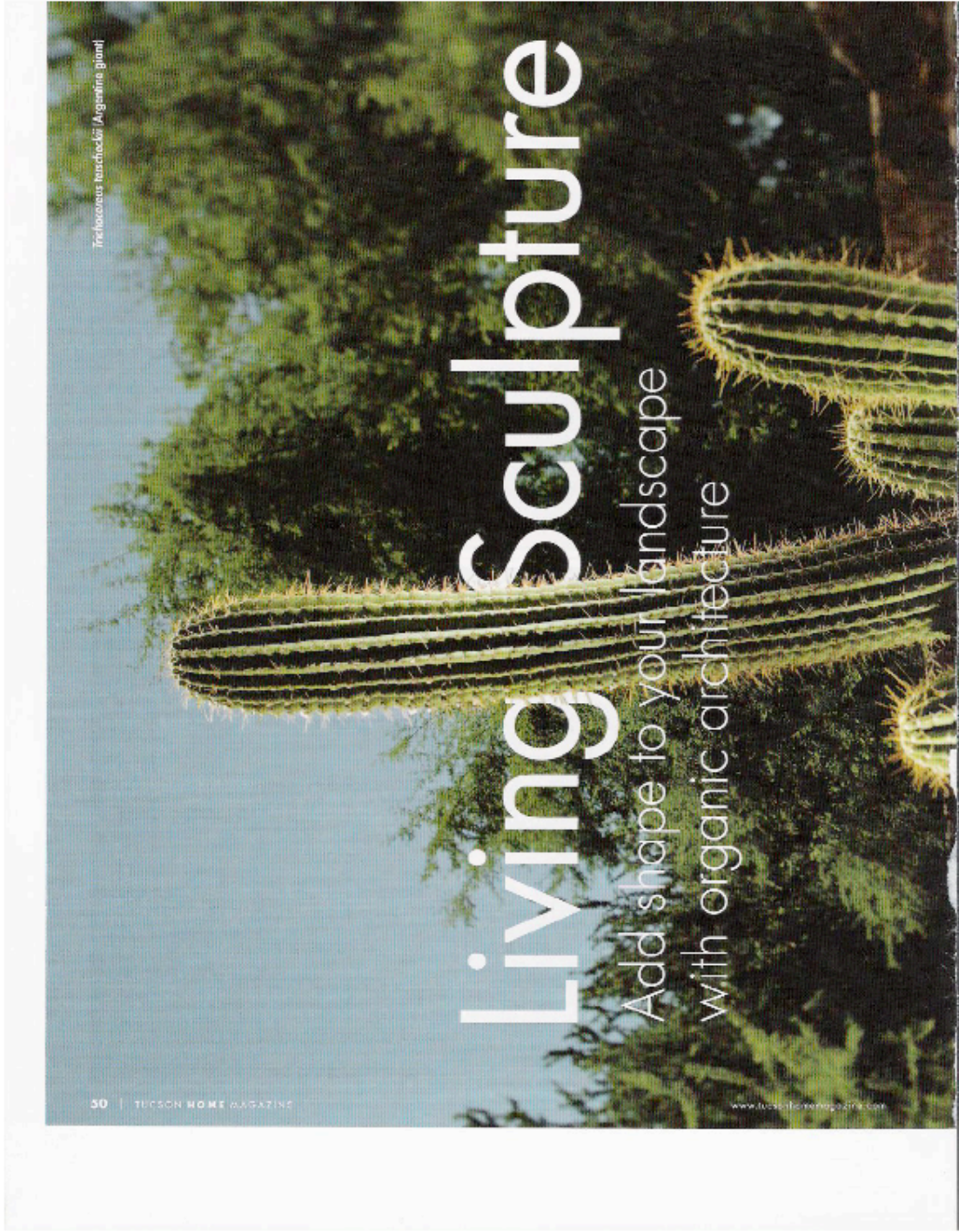
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Trichocereus pascheana / Argentine giant

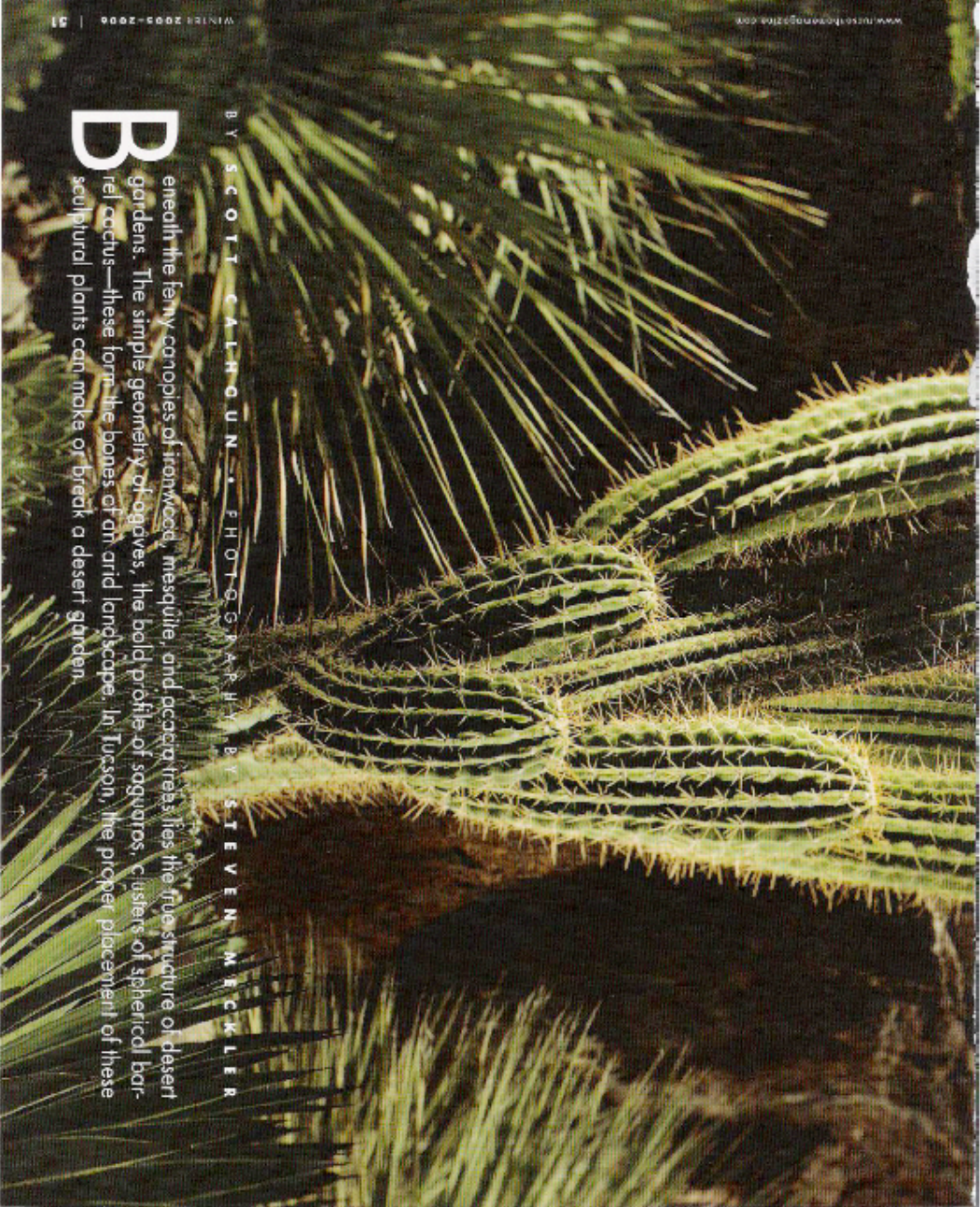
Living Sculpture

Add shape to your landscape
with organic architecture



BY SCOTT CALHOUN • PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVEN MECKLER

Beneath the ferny canopies of ironwood, mesquite, and acacia trees lies the true structure of desert gardens. The simple geometry of agaves, the bold profile of saguaros, clusters of spherical barrel cactus—these form the bones of an arid landscape. In Tucson, the proper placement of these sculptural plants can make or break a desert garden.



Although sculptural plants grow, flower, and reach for the sun like other plants, for garden-design purposes it may be more useful to consider them as architectural elements—spheres, stars, columns, and organ pipes. The idea of having these plants serve as architectural elements is not as strange as it might seem. Just take a look at some of the new public art on the streets of Tucson. On Harrison Road north of Golf Links Road you'll find steel saguaros and barrel cactus sculptures in the medians alongside their natural namesakes. If these bold plants inspire local artists, why shouldn't we celebrate them in our gardens?

Consider the saguaro. Its columnar structure recalls Greek architecture. Following him, it swells in the middle like a Doric column, while its fluted ribs resemble the Corinthian and Ionic orders. Columnar cactus such as saguaros provide strong vertical elements in a garden. Plus, no plant better exemplifies the Sonoran desert—saguaros reign as the signature icon of our region. Saguaros look good planted as single specimens or clustered under desert trees, as they sometimes grow in the wild. A foothills palo verde will often harbor a handful of young saguaros under its fine canopy; this pattern can be mimicked in desert gardens. Other large columnar cactus appropriate for Tucson include the Argentine giant. With its golden spines, the Argentine giant rightly glows in the evening light.

For a more modern, stylized version of a column, the totem pole cactus works to excellent effect. With its avocado-green color and multifaceted arms, whose tips resemble melting candles, the totem pole proves both bizarre and wonderful. When grouped together and set against a colored wall or rocky backdrop, the totem pole serves as organic sculpture. A Baja California native, the totem pole can be sensitive to cold and in Tucson should be located in warm microclimates, such as in south- or west-facing courtyards near walls or homes.

THE QUEEN VICTORIA SHOULD BE PLACED WHERE ITS STAR QUALITIES CAN BE ADMIRER.

Like the totem pole, the organ pipe and senita dislike temperatures below the upper 20s, but are worth growing for their multi-armed beauty. Both the organ pipe and the senita occur mostly in Mexico, but their range extends north into Arizona. The fruit of the organ pipe cactus, *Stylidium dillenii*, tastes like melon and strawberry, another good reason to have an organ pipe close at hand. Other marginally cold-hardy multi-armed cactus include the Mexican fence post, which had a cameo appearance in the movie *Frida* as a fence around Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera's Mexico City studio. A civilized plant—the cactus equivalent of a pinstriped suit—the Mexican fence post, with its deep green color

THE FRUIT OF THE ORGAN PIPE CACTUS TASTES LIKE MELON AND STRAWBERRY.





Selenicereus schottii (senita)



and thin vertical white stripes, ranks high among home gardeners. The growing tips of the Mexican fence post should be protected when temperatures fall below 30°, something you should do with the organ pipe and sentra as well. Place 32-ounce (or larger) Strobotan cups on the plants' growing tips to protect them from frost.

For a hairy multi-armed look, the snow pole stands out as an obvious choice. With a similar growth habit to the organ pipe, the entire plant wears a coat of fine white hairs, giving it a troll-like appearance. The red flowers of the snow pole bloom on the sides rather than on the tops of its arms, which makes for an arresting display in spring.

If you can't get enough of bold, pointed plants, the agave can shine as the star of your garden. These New World plants come in myriad sizes and colors. From the diminutive and sophisticated Queen Victoria agave to the giant powder-blue Weber's agave, nearly every yard has a place for these important American plants. Much remarked upon in containers, the *Agave victoriae-reginae* or Queen Victoria agave's symmetrical rosette with deep green leaves and white markings resembles its namesake's crown. Because of their beauty, large Queen Victoria specimens command a high price. Like the Mexican fence post, the Queen Victoria agave boasts a sophisticated shape and should be placed in a spot where its star qualities can be closely admired.

When planting the larger species of agaves, such as *Agave americana* or *Agave schottii*, make sure to allow plenty of room for growth. Big agaves should

FOR A CONTEMPORARY
LOOK, PLANT GOLDEN
BARRELS IN MASSE IN
SQUARE OR RECTANGULAR
PLANTING BEDS.

and smaller beds, even those adjacent to patios and walkways. Consider the medium-sized *Agave parryi*, the dense, dark green ball of the *Agave nutana*, or the *Agave schottii*, whose ghostly blue-silver leaves appear to have been dusted with powdered sugar.

If the agave is the star of sculptural plants, the ocotillo is the shooting star, or maybe the lightning bolt, of bold plants. It seems impossible to imagine a desert plant more versatile in a home garden than the ocotillo. It can be used as a focal point, a fence, and even espaliered on a trellis.

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be kept well away from outdoor dining areas and pathways—places where your dinner guests could accidentally meet the business end of the plant. These giants of the agave world grow to six feet, and given the right conditions, you could end up with a 12-foot-high plant. On the bright side, many small- and medium-sized agaves fit nicely into pots



Furcraea rectispinus (barrel cactus)

as has recently been the practice of Tucson garden designer Greg Corman. The fiery red tips of the plant attract hummingbirds and serve as markers as the hummers migrate north from Mexico in the spring. Having to transplant large bare-root specimens—especially the dried-out Texas imports too often sold by dubious roadside vendors—seems the only downside to the ocotillo. Thankfully, Arizona nurseries have recognized the need for containerized ocotillo, and many now grow ocotillo in pots that will transplant without a hitch. It's a good thing, because every desert yard needs at least one ocotillo.

Spherical and symmetrical, barrel cactus are, pardon the pun, worlds unto themselves. The imperial-palace yellow of the golden barrel and the deep red of the fire barrel make these plants highly desirable accents. For a contemporary look, plant golden barrels en masse in square or rectangular planting beds. For a more natural look, consider seeding desert bluebells around your golden barrel. The combination of blue and gold will stop traffic in your spring garden.

Because of the broad array of cactus and succulents available to Tucson homeowners, there is really no excuse for excluding sculptural plants from your garden. From a funky Dr. Seuss-like centerpiece to something as classical and refined as an Ionic column, one of these sculptural desert plants will fit the bill. After all,



Cylindropuntia strausii (snow pole)



Selenicereus thurberii (organ pipe)

our desert overflows with globes, columns, stars, and lightning, and who can resist bringing a few of those familiar regional elements into the garden?

A fourth-generation Arizona native, Scott Cashner is a Tucson-based garden writer and landscape designer. Scott writes and gardens in the community of Creana with his wife and daughter.