

# Book chronicles trips to catch wildflowers at nearly a dozen Southwestern locations

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**S**cott Calhoun may stop to smell the roses, but he's willing to hit the highway to catch a glimpse of the split-leaf Indian paintbrush or the mountain sunflowers of the Snowbird basin, or the tiny sulfur buckwheat blooms of Cedar City.

Calhoun, a Utah native and Tucson, Ariz., resident, wrote "Chasing Wildflowers: a Mad Search for Wild Gardens" (Rio Nuevo Publishers, \$16.95). It's part picture book, with 69 color photos, and part road-trip diary, complete with suggestions on where to look for flowers, where to stay, where to eat, and what to listen to and read.

The book chronicles his trips to nearly a dozen Southwestern locations.

"All the trips I took were to extreme places for plants to be growing, whether they were on barren sand dunes or in canyons where 200 inches of snow covers the soil most of the year," Calhoun said. "These flowers are tenacious. They survive in extreme environments where most plants cannot."

Calhoun noticed wildflowers as he was working on his bachelor's degree at the University of Utah, and visited relatives who lived in and around Ogdan. But it was earlier, in Phoenix, that his real passion took root.

"I was with my mother in a suburb and we found a field of penstemon, a neon pink flower. It was just this gigantic field of them, growing for seed. They were wild, but cultivated. That's when I started paying attention to flowers. I was interested in gardening in the West, which is the intersection of the natural world and gardening. ... So I started taking these trips, just looking for wildflowers."

Calhoun's goal was not to disturb or

collect the flowers, but to enjoy them and take notes about the conditions in which they thrive.

Flowers similar to the wild ones can be purchased in garden centers, he said. A home gardener who is savvy to the ways of wildflowers can choose sandy, well-drained soil in full sun for flowers like those in the desert, or moister soil and shadier locations for plants that are at home in mountain valleys.

## Peak season

Prior to becoming an author with his 2005 book, "A Yard Full of Sun: The Story of A Gardener's Obsession That Got a Little Out of Hand," Calhoun managed a garden nursery.

"The time the wildflowers were blooming was also the peak gardening season," he said. "It would kill me when we got a great bloom year, and there were more flowers outside than inside. I was stuck unloading trucks and managing things. I took trips as short as a few hours, took photos, then turned around to drive right back."

Calhoun became a freelance writer and garden designer when he realized he was losing years he would never get back.

"Sometimes it's 30 or 40 years between really huge blooms. I didn't want to miss a great bloom, then have to wait until I was 70 for another."

This should be an average bloom year around the West, he said. A spectacular bloom usually comes after a few dry years and a mild, wet winter.

"Seeds are intelligent, in a strange way," Calhoun said. "Seeds can last for decades until conditions are right."

## Tripping

Calhoun writes in a laid-back, chatty narrative, describing his trip, the history of the region, and offering advice and

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ABOVE: A tiny snapdragon, which Calhoun called the Painted Desert mat penstemon, blooms in late July at Cedar Breaks National Monument.

## Blooming

### From 1E

entertaining musings.

In the Snowbird area, he suggests 17 flowers worth finding (don't expect to find all in bloom at one time). He recommends asking for the special summer rate at the Snowbird Resort and eating on-site at El Chanate. The black bean enchiladas are especially fine, he said.

If you head to Salt Lake City, he would send you to the Red Iguana for the molé or to Sawadee Thai for the Guay Teaw Pad Mao.

"The things I really enjoy are wildflowers and food," Calhoun said, with a laugh. "It makes sense I would write a book like this."

In the Cedar Breaks area, Calhoun suggests The Bard's Eating and Drinking Establishment in Cedar City, and the beer called Provo Girl.

In Kanab, he recommends the Junction Drive-In and the thick shakes you have to eat with a spoon.

"I haven't seen those shakes anywhere else, but you can get them in any small town in Utah."

And don't forget the



LEFT: Split-leaf Indian paintbrush blooms in late July at Snowbird.

wildflowers. Calhoun offers one special tip just for bloom-stalking newbies:

"If you can train to look a little closer, it's amazing the diversity of plants and flowers there are all around us," Calhoun said. "Maybe it's a cultural thing, but when we look for flowers, we look for something big, like petunias and things you find in a garden center. If you look closer, you'll see things every bit as exquisite and more adapted to local growing conditions. Wildflowers are interesting

plants to consider for your garden."

Or not. According to industry trends, home gardens may be declining.

"There's a kind of panic that young people aren't gardening now," Calhoun said. "Once the boomers stop, everybody will be too busy blogging and playing video games. This book is my small effort to find another way to be involved. If you are looking at flowers, photographing and hiking, it's another way to have plants in your life."

