

BOOKS

Scott Calhoun's love of Arizona's environment will make you want to get working on your own yard

Gardener's Soul

BY LEE ALLEN, mailbag@tucsonweekly.com

If you've ever planted a seed in the ground and waited patiently for results, this book is for you. It's an instant winner, beginning with its full-color cover photography, its equally colorful *Yard Full of Sun* title and the author's self-effacing notion that the book was "the story of a gardener's obsession that got a little out of hand."

"Garden might be too fine a word for the ragtag assemblage that makes up our home landscape," writes Scott Calhoun, noting that his little adobe house and yard in the shadow of the Rincon Mountains contains a variety of native plants, rock and cactus intermingled with rusty iron and Mexican pop bottles. "You could call our garden a corral of plants or a nurseryman's obsession run wild," he pens in explaining his version of what can be done with a yard full of sun.

The fourth-generation Arizonan (manager of the garden center at Civano Nursery) is much too modest about his accomplishments, which have been featured in *Sunset* and *Horticulture* magazines. His passion shows through, however, as he brings the same gusto to his writing as to his gardening. Well-known Tucson wordsmith Chuck Bowden says, "Your house is not your home, your yard is, and Calhoun will show you the way to go home. And trust me, most likely we've all been homeless until this fine and honest book fell into our hands."

The author, his wife, Deirdre, and W. Ross Humphreys are responsible for the imaginative photo illustrations that call any gardener's soul to action. It's hard to resist the impulse to rush out and scatter seeds in your own backyard so you can claim some of that color as your own.

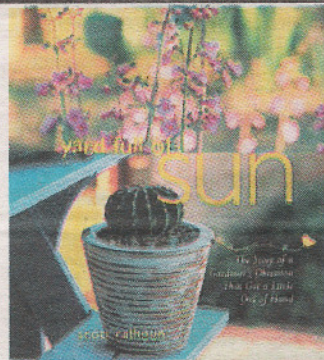
Transplants to Tucson, as most of us are, we can recollect our initial impression of the geological curiosity of sand and rock we call

the Sonoran Desert: It inspires a firm belief that people weren't meant to live here. "In the American Southwest, I began a lifelong love affair with a pile of rock," observed naturalist Edward Abbey.

Calhoun shows us how he balanced human needs with resource conservation, turning his eighth of an acre into an array of xeriscaped native vegetation. "To pull this off," he writes, "you have to be as cagey as an urban coyote." His seeds germinated where they fell. Desert shrubs took on bold natural form. Pruning was minimal or nonexistent. "The celebration of Western American style was liberating. No grass, no formal borders, no servitude to tired design models. This garden was the cougar, not the blow-dried Persian cat."

The Calhouns felt like pioneers in their love of native plants, creatively combining them in unusual palettes. They planted desert lobelia next to golden columbine and used an ocotillo fence and datura as a backdrop. Later, they added a tree trinity of palo verde, mesquite, and ironwood (he refers to them as "plants big enough to climb"). Calhoun keeps landscaping from getting too serious by showing his sense of humor as well as his knowledge of landscaping. Commenting on the many varieties of mesquite trees, he writes, "They're as promiscuous as a single mother of six kids with six different fathers making an appearance on the Jerry Springer show."

Calhoun admits to a weakness for penstemons, or "towers of hummingbird power," as he calls them. "Falling for pink flowers the color of a blushing maiden is unusual for me, but this spunky Arizona-native is irresistible, and if there is a fairer perennial plant in the desert, I have yet to see it." He lists Parry's penstemon as No. 1 in his top 20 favorite desert wildflowers, well ahead of desert bluebells



Yard Full of Sun: The Story of a Gardener's Obsession That Got a Little out of Hand

BY SCOTT CALHOUN

RIO NUEVO PUBLISHERS

196 PAGES, \$22.95

and marigolds, brittlebush and Mexican gold poppy.

Interspersed between colorful narrative and vivid photos are bits of dry-climate gardening trivia. For instance, before the invention of air conditioning, many homes used trellised vines to protect west- and south-facing walls from intense afternoon sun. "Windows fully shaded from the outside have a summer solar heat-gain reduction of 80 percent," he writes. In another example of combining beauty with efficiency, he mentions that passion vine can provide a snack treat, because it bears fruit the size and taste of large grapes.

With his front and back yards now completed to satisfaction, Calhoun expresses his happiness: "Our rocky, clay soil is dotted with rosettes of penstemons, the yard different and the same, a little less wild than it had been, but not completely domesticated. More than anything, it is a garden set against the canvas of a big Arizona sky—a yard full of sun. The people and things I love best are close at hand and my garden is full, as is my life."

Read Calhoun's book. Grab a seed catalogue and a trowel, and build your own happiness. **TW**