

Around My Desert Garden

By Bob Torrest

March 2006

March 31 – All the trees and shrubs mentioned last month continued to flower except for *Sophora secundiflora*. There were flowers for the first time on a five foot *Acacia rigidula* (Black Brush) with dark green leaves and rod shaped flowers, and on a recently planted *Acacia saligna* (Weeping wattle) with evergreen long leaves and bright yellow flowers on the branch tips. *Leucaena retusa* flowered for the first time at three feet and Chinaberry (*Melia azedarach*) is especially colorful with dark green leaves, lavender flowers and last year's pale yellow berries. Towards the end of the month, Chanar, the Chilean palo verde (*Geoffroea decorticans*), began to flower with bright yellow blossoms. Of course, it is the peeling green bark that makes this tree unique. It has been so dry that there are still lots of seed from last year on the ground. With the rain at mid-month, brittle bushes (*Encelia farinosa*) began leafing out and flowering where there was extra water, as did Desert mallow (*Sphaeralcea ambigua*). A large shrubby plant with white flower spikes, identified at Baker's nursery as white justicia, has done well and seeded itself within 30 feet of the parent. By the end of the month, Coulter's hibiscus and desert senna were also in flower.

We've just been through a record drought but there was about 1.5 inches of rain at mid-month. After that came cool, cloudy, drizzly days which most of the plants seemed to appreciate. By the way, we had a light freeze on the 22nd although the TV weather said 45F (this sort of mismatch seems to happen several times each winter). Madagascar ocotillo (*Alluaudia procera*) dropped all leaves around mid-month but within a week was leafing out again. (Miles Anderson's book says it will not tolerate any frost!) *Didieria trollii* came through the winter (a few freezing nights) with a sheet cover on a small frame for the coldest nights. *Pachypodium namaquanum* was fine with little or no protection. Other Pachys and Adeniums, etc., were kept indoors at 50F or more. Burseras in the ground, *B. hindsiana* at four feet and *B. microphylla* at six feet, were fine with no protection. However, three foot potted plants of *B. laxifolia* and *B. schlechtendalii* had their leaves go brown, although protected with temperatures well above freezing. I am trying to root some Gumbo Limbo twigs. This bursera from south Florida becomes a tree with a red-brown varnished looking bark. A good place to see them is at the Gumbo Limbo Nature Center in Boca Raton and all along A1A (Ocean Blvd.) in that area.

Fouquieria macdougallii (most easy to flower) came through the winter in an open location with no damage, while small potted *F. diguetii* and *F. ochoteranae* were fine with a bit of cover. The Baja elephant tree (*Pachycormus discolor*) has had no problem with our winters and is now 12 feet tall and quite full. A *Ficus palmera* at five feet is showing new growth and was happy outdoors this winter with only a little overhead shade. Boojum trees look their best now, and with trunks at 15 inches and branches to 30 inches, needed no protection.

Many aloes are done flowering but *A. striata*, *superba*, *variegata x saponaria* continued and this month were joined by *A. Camperi*, *divaricata*, Crosby's prolific, *barbadensis*,

vera and *kedongensis*. *Euphorbia fruticosa* and *polycantha* have been flowering in the ground as has *E. milii* (crown of thorns) in pots with a bit of protection. I was surprised that no one corrected an error in the January column...the "Sharkskin" agave is a cross of *A. scabra* and *A. ferdinandi-regis* and not with *A. victoriae-reginae*.

Lots of cacti were flowering this month with even more to come in April. *Ferocactus glaucescens* continued all month, and by mid-month the first echinocereus was flowering with many more soon after. Cleistocacti continued all month, there were more mammillarias and later on thelocacti. In particular, *T. macdowellii* has large pink flowers with a yellow center while *T. bicolor* has a large purple flower with a red center. All the myrtillocacti are now in flower after only the cristate forms in February. *Echinocereus nicholii* got started at the end of the month. It is a large plant with golden spines, a pink to purple flower, and is a native. I was lucky to be able to trade for a seven foot cutting of *Cephalocereus senilis*. Now it will be a wait to see if it roots. Cuttings of this size, at least for *Stenocereus*, can take up to a year before showing new growth. By the way, columnar cactus cuttings kept outdoors in five gallon pots since October look fine but have not rooted yet, while those in the ground are showing new growth.

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS ARE WELCOMED. For those who were looking for our plant sale notice (which was omitted with the March issue arrived in mid-April and had asked about specific plants, please call or e-mail.