

## Around My Desert Garden

By Bob Torrest

August 2007

August 15—Beyond the usual flowering trees and shrubs like red bird and Mexican bird (*Caesalpinia pulcherrima* and *C. Mexicana*), yellow bells and desert willow, in early August the Texas barrel (*Ferocactus hamatacanthus*) has bright yellow flowers even in shade. The local mammillaria is covered in bright flowers again as is a similar plant from Tucson. *Ferocactus cylindraceus* is starting to flower again and *F. wislizenii* is getting started. Lots of the *Trichocereus* varieties and other *Echinopsis* are also flowering again and you can choose the colors you like best. *Aloe karasbergensis* is certainly the most colorful aloe now and the flowers last.

A fast moving dust storm came through on July 19 with little rain and the next day it was overcast and breezy...a “new” kind of weather although the “monsoon” still hadn’t officially begun. The high winds knocked over half the arms of a tropical cereus that had gotten up to eight feet and looked almost perfect before the wind. Just cut the arms off where bent over and they will make nice five gallon pots that someone will want. Of course, large prickly pears like Indian fig always do some of this “self-pruning” by this time of year as do *Trichocereus spachianus* and a few others. These are all relatively rapidly growing plants and most of us have more than we need. Remember that the Indian fig cuttings make good rabbit food that helps minimize damage to other more valuable plants. On July 31, I went out at 9 a.m. to look around after the first rain (only an eighth of an inch). Some things were looking refreshed, and then I saw it...an enormous limb (32 feet) of an old mesquite had come down in the back yard...it took three hours just to prune out enough to get it off some cacti. An eight foot *Neobuxbaumia tetetzo* is now 4.5 feet and several arms had to be taken off a *Stenocereus griseus*. It was sad to see a heavy branch right in the center of an *Agave tequiliana* that, after many years, was finally starting to get some size and look good. It could have been much worse. So, some of the reality of desert gardening is the occasional major clean up (a battery powered reciprocating saw really helps). The big, time consuming chores are tree pruning, large cacti cuttings and the removal of large plants (mostly trees and opuntias) that are done.

We found an empty acre in 1983 and have tried to make almost all of it into desert gardens. It is possible for two people in their spare time, if they both enjoy it. But expect bouts of heavy and/or tedious work. Of course, if you are so inclined and lucky, you may find some good (and probably expensive) help for the big jobs. Anything much larger than an acre will take full time help (e.g., the Wallace Desert Gardens, which Lee mentioned recently, has a staff). It is a matter of opinion, although the Wallace Desert Gardens is well worth seeing, it doesn’t compare with the Huntington...Lee’s enthusiasm notwithstanding. Also, most of what is in the greenhouse in the Wallace Garden can be grown outside in the somewhat warmer winters in the more southern parts of Scottsdale and Tempe, etc...

*Aloe secundiflora* had been fully exposed to the hard freeze and since then the leaves have been drying up and dying back from the tips. I finally pulled this plant (which was in full sun) since the stem was soft. Cutting off this soft stem allowed more leaves to come off like a celery stalk until the remaining core also fell apart. Since many of you have gotten *A. secundiflora* from us, I thought more details about our experience with it this year might be of interest. While the fully exposed and unprotected plant is finally gone, another up close to a western facing brick wall is fine. Others under trees or otherwise somewhat protected have all made it with some leaf tip die-back. Although I know better, when in San Diego recently, I succumbed to the compulsion to “save” some small plants and brought them back and kept them outside in some shade. Among the aloes lost this way were *A. broomii*, *A. distans*, *A. glauca*, *A. spectabilis* and *A. reitzii*. These and others often will not survive the extreme change from cool San Diego to a Phoenix summer.