

## Around My Desert Garden

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On the one-year anniversary of two nights of a rare, really hard freeze, and after a record hot summer, the remaining aloes are doing well. Four very different aloes have been flowering. *A. ramosissima* is a large bush form at over six feet in full sun. The bright yellow flower spikes are unique and the woody trunk is nicely marked. This aloe will grow and look good in part shade, but is then more susceptible to a hard freeze. *Aloe krapohlina* is small with blue leaves (not what the books say) but it is from a reputable dealer) and a neat red flower spike. Intermediate in size, *A. cryptopoda* has dark green leaves with long-lasting very colorful spikes of red and yellow flowers. *A. pirottae*, also mid-size, is a soft green with long curving flower spikes of pale red and green flowers. Of course, lots of other aloes will be flowering soon. If you have the space, *A. vaombe* with its very colorful red candelabra flowers is one you will like. Some clustering aloes like *A. elegans* and *A. camperi* are easier to separate at this time of year after the ground is saturated. Just pull steadily on the pups.

For several days from December 26, TV weather forecasts included freeze warnings of various degrees. Usually the first warning includes a reminder to cover tender plants with the prediction for the freeze from 3-9 a.m. By the fourth and fifth day the forecast said, "cold but no freeze warning." I track low temperatures with the minimum temperature in a "warm microclimate" a few feet from a south facing adobe wall. On the first day of the forecast freeze warning my warmest minimum was 33 F so there was a light freeze everywhere else. I had the same reading for the next two nights and the fourth and fifth night was a degree or two cooler (the forecast was no freeze). This same pattern has occurred in prior winters, so if you have made an effort to protect some tender plants from the freeze don't be in a hurry to remove the protection. Styrofoam cups and paper bags on frost sensitive columnar cacti can stay in place for several days with no problem. The same holds for cloth covers or wraps. The warmest spot is often about the same temperature cited for my area, but the cooler areas of our acre can be 4 or 5 degrees lower. Once you calibrate some particular spot against the forecast temperature, it will usually give you the guide you need to decide on freeze protection.

Since the last article, there has been lots of color on the usual foliage plants. A few that haven't been cited before include *Anisacanthus quadrifidus* (flame anisacanthus) with tubular red to orange flowers on a three foot shrub. The more common desert honeysuckle (*A. thurberi*) flowers in the spring. *Justicia candicans* (red justicia or hummingbird bush) is a small shrub, while tecoma orange jubilee is a very colorful large shrub. *Lycium fremontii* (freemont thorn bush) has filled out with all the rain. It is a large evergreen bush with small white to purple flowers and red fruit. Finally, although often mentioned in the past, Cascalote (*Caesalpinia cacalaco*) with fragrant long-lasting yellow flower spikes is well worth the problems. The hard freeze did major damage last year, but the tree has come back. Don't let the thorns and litter keep you from growing this one.

Perhaps the most unexpected cactus flower this time of year is the purple of *Ferocactus latispinus*. *Cochemia pondii* has red tubular flowers while those of *Ariocarpus agavoides* are pink-purple. *Myrtillocactus geometrizans* has also begun to flower (the monstrous plants), and the small white flowers are followed by a good edible fruit. The soaking rains have plumped up tree-form prickly pears. The santa rita opuntia doesn't get tall but some always break at the joints between pads. They root easily and with their purple color there are always some takers. This year for the first time San Pedro cactus (*Trichocereus pachanoi*) got so swollen with the rain and inclined in the saturated soil, that many of the four foot columns broke. When you plant them, make sure they get some afternoon shade.