



Desert Survivors

NURTURING PLANTS AND PEOPLE SINCE 1981

SEPTEMBER 2008

The Arizona Blackberry

One of my favorite books is *Arizona Flora* (1960) by Kearney & Peebles, which is still the definitive guide to the complete flora of our diverse state. Although I, like many other native-plant nerds, look forward to a badly needed update, this great compendium is still a phenomenal resource. One day when reading through the section on the rose family (Rosaceae), my interest peaked at our native *Rubus* species. For those familiar with the book, you might agree that the authors—though they seem like great people—often unfairly describe native berries, like hackberry (*Celtis pallida*) and wolfberry (*Lycium sp.*), as “insipid” and unpalatable for people. I disagree. Although commercially impractical because of the small size and large seed, these little berries are quite tasty and palatable. Kearney and Peebles also have an interesting habit of describing what I typically consider pleasantly aromatic plants as “ill scented” or foul. So, when I read that they described our native blackberry, *Rubus arizonensis*, as producing “edible fruits” that are “good for eating raw,” I nearly fell out of my chair. So began my interest in cultivating this plant.



Last summer Evan Dick, a member of our nursery staff, spotted this Arizona blackberry on a trip to Sycamore Canyon in the Pajarito Mountains, near the Mexican border. Upon hearing this, I asked Dick to return for a small number of cuttings, which we would attempt to root for mother plants for the nursery. Evan and Aaron Chambers, another member

of the nursery staff, both travelled back to the chigger-infested canyon, wading through the streams in shorts and flipflops. They returned tired, but triumphant with a few cuttings in hand. Luckily the cuttings rooted in nicely, as Evan suffered from an excruciating poison ivy rash on his feet for about three weeks. Apparently, in addition to a nice blackberry patch, the canyon boasts an incredible poison ivy population. Fortunately, the mother plants quickly sent out long runners, which have since produced many more plants. So, when you buy our luscious blackberry plants, remember the sacrifice Evan and Aaron made for your horticultural and gustatory pleasure!

In cultivation, *Rubus arizonensis*, also called Arizona dewberry, requires partial shade and moderate water. Ideally, it should grow in relatively rich soil with decent drainage. Adding some sand to the soil, with compost or a good layer of mulch on the surface will be beneficial. If irrigated properly, blackberries are easy to grow in Tucson. I would estimate that this plant is cold hardy to 10 degrees

Fahrenheit. Most *Rubus* species are heavy feeders, but blackberries do not have the high nutritional requirements that raspberries do. They will, however, definitely relish any fertilizer that you give them. To avoid exacerbating transplant stress, wait a month or so before fertilizing a plant recently put into the ground. I would recommend a well-balanced organic fertilizer (5-5-5 or something similar).

Fall Plant Sale

public sale

October 4 & 5

SAT. 8-5 & SUN. 10-5

10% off on all purchases
20% off for members
& no sales tax

members only sale

September 27

Sat., 8-5

20% off on all purchases
through the 5th

JOINING on the DAY
of the Sale COUNTS!

Arizona blackberry is native to the mountains of Arizona, from the Mexican border to the White Mountains and Sedona. In southern Arizona it can be found in the Santa Catalina, Rincon, Santa Rita, Patagonia, Huachuca, Tumacacori and Patagonia ranges. Unlike our native raspberries (*R. strigosus*, *R. neomexicana*), which occur at higher elevations, it grows

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Desert Survivors' staff (and most of its plants) have survived another summer in the Sonoran Desert. This summer was more bearable than most because our Monsoon gave us fairly decent rainfall. Adequate rainfall is always a reason to be grateful! We love to see the desert greening—which reminds me...

Lately, Americans have modified the usage of a word in our language in a way that I find very exciting. The evolution of a word is not unusual; a word can easily take on a new or expanded meaning. In this case, the English word "green" has historically been used to describe one of the colors of the light spectrum. It has also been used to describe intense moods, as in "green with envy." This word has also been used to help me with my golf game—like, "Rich, the "green" is way over there!"

Americans are now commonly using the word "green" to describe our appreciation for ecological health. Today, in

addition to all the old meanings, "green" refers to our new-found concern for protecting and preserving our fragile planet; it is an important word for us to rally around.

Doing the "green" thing means recycling resources, developing new energy sources, and protecting the natural environment. It's been a long time coming, but hopefully this rally is not too late. "Green People" serve a purpose higher than their own convenience and immediate gratification. "Green People" understand that our planet is not the exclusive property of humans to do as they please. They understand that our planet is a gift to be sustained, cherished, and shared with all forms of life. They know that our continued existence depends upon our ability to live in respectful harmony with the natural environment. Being "green" means keeping check on pollution, keeping the land native, and allowing corridors for wildlife movement as our city grows. It

may mean consuming *fewer* natural resources—making do with less or repairing rather than buying new on a whim. And it means thinking ahead to group our errands—using less fossil fuel in fewer trips to the store. It may be less convenient, but what are our options?

There *are* life forms on Earth that consume the resources around them until the resources are exhausted and the host is dead. These life forms are called "viruses." When a virus consumes all its available resources, it dies too. We, as thoughtful beings, need to decide whether our role in nature as humans is to be the ultimate virus, or the ultimate caretaker of the host called Earth.

All of us at Desert Survivors believe that being "green" is the most critical and important cause of the 21st century. Please join us in embracing the concept and mission of being "green." It's not just a color anymore!

Rich Bechtold
Executive Director

Nursery Director's Report

We are happy to report that Desert Survivors has a new partnership with Oracle and Catalina State Parks. Knowing that State budget cuts have heavily impacted the parks, we are especially pleased to be able to assist by providing ecologically appropriate plant material for revegetation projects in the parks. Oracle State Park has begun revegetating around the historic Kannally House, and has put in a wonderful selection of locally native plants, while reorganizing existing plantings into thematic biomes. It is really satisfying to see plants from the surrounding habitats going into these special places, and it has been a pleasure to work with park staff and volunteer Chuck LaFevre, a native seed collector and landscaper. We



A section of Desert Survivors' Grassland Garden

greatly appreciate the Park's awareness of the importance of using native plants, as well as its tenacity in following through on those principles.

Planting inappropriate nonnative species can have a significant detrimental impact on our public lands. And often, the results of planting non-natives are unpredictable. In the Tucson area, the

introduction of Chilean mesquite trees along the Mount Lemmon Highway provide an example of this. These Chilean mesquites were planted years ago through a well-meaning Forest Service revegetation project. They grow quickly and provide shade, but Chilean mesquite trees can cross-pollinate with our native velvet mesquites and form hybrids. I recently came across what appeared to be a hybrid mesquite a half-mile away from the highway, deep in a mountain canyon. These hybrid trees may thrive while offering less to the natural community than the velvet mesquite would have. They can easily carry the genetic code for some of the less desirable qualities of the Chilean mesquite—less palatable seedpods (thus less food for wildlife), or branches more

Featured Plants for Fall Sale

Rubus arizonensis (Arizona blackberry) – See our feature article on page 1.

Bouvardia ternifolia (smooth bouvardia, scarlet bouvardia, firecrackerbush) – The firecracker bush is an attractive perennial shrub that grows up to two or three feet, with impressive clusters of bright red tubular flowers relished by hummingbirds. Its bright green leaves occur in groups of three at the internodes, and the leafy plant is attractive even in winter, when it's not in bloom. Bouvardia is native in Arizona and is locally common in the Santa Catalina and Rincon Mountains between 3,000 and 6,400 feet. This plant likes good drainage and needs moderate watering. Although it can handle full sun, it would be happier with a few hours of afternoon shade. It typically blooms in summer and fall, but in Tucson it can also blossom in the spring. Bouvardia is in the madder family (Rubiaceae).

Hilaria belangeri (curly mesquite grass) – Although we have had several mother plants for some time, we are finally able to offer this popular grass for sale! A highly nutritious forage grass, it is favored by desert tortoises and many other animals; it seems to handle grazing fairly well, even from cattle.

H. belangeri plants stay small, typically under one foot tall and wide, sending out stolons (aerial plants on runners) to form small patches of plantlets, which nicely covers an area. This tough little grass loves full sun and, once established, demands little water. Naturally occurring across Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, it occurs locally in the Santa Catalina and Tucson Mountains between 2,700 and 4,600 feet.



Bouvardia flower cluster

Ipomoea thurberi (Thurber morning glory) – In Arizona, this fabulous perennial vine is almost exclusively a Santa Cruz County native, found primarily in rocky terrain or oak woodlands. It boasts large, glorious, pink flowers that open in the evening and stay through dawn. The plant forms a good-sized tuber, and when it goes dormant in the winter, it dies back to the ground, resprouting the following summer. The foliage of this morning

glory is particularly distinctive, with leaves of deep, subhastate lobes.

In cultivation *I. thurberi* will bloom in August and September (as it has in the nursery). It can handle full sun or partial shade, and requires moderate to little water once established. We highly recommend it.

Tephrosia tenella (red hoarypea) – A member of the bean family (Fabaceae), this legume grows as a small subshrub to about two feet tall and wide. Dense clusters of pinnate leaves give this plant a special appeal, as do the unique, pea-like, purple to lavender flowers it forms during the monsoon season. *T. tenella* (also known as *T. viscoides*) likes good drainage, needs moderate to little water, and can handle full sun or partial shade. It grows locally in the Santa Catalinas between 2,700 and 4,000 feet, usually along washes or in canyons.

There appear to be two forms in the Catalinas—a sprawling annual and a shrubby perennial. Our seeds were collected in Rattlesnake Canyon from the shrubby perennial form. The two forms may actually be separate species not yet recognized, or the perennials could just be a phenomenon of plants occurring in ideal habitats. Further study appears to be in order.

Nursery Director's Report, cont.

susceptible to breaking during heavy winds, or other characteristics not suited to our local habitat. So, Desert Survivors focuses on plants well adapted to our local area, plants that contribute to a healthy web of life, and we are pleased to maintain native stock to help the State Parks system restore or invigorate the native landscape.

At the nursery, the incredible summer rains have been manna for our demonstration gardens. Our fledging grassland garden has grown quickly, as has the Santa Rita Mountain garden. The Historic Santa Cruz garden trees are soaring upwards. Plans to create a large Tucson Mountain Garden, however, have been cancelled in favor of growing space for more native mesquite and ironwood trees.

Jim Verrier
Director of Plant Nursery

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between 3,500 and 5,500 feet elevation, which makes it much more suitable to cultivation at lower elevations. Although in the wild this semi-woody vine inhabits riparian communities, near streams or springs, I often see it growing away from the streambeds in more mesic settings. The plants send long runners that occasionally root where they touch the ground, forming a thicket or patch. During the late spring and/or monsoon season, five-petaled white flowers form, which turn into tasty blackberries. The plants lose their leaves when they go dormant during the winter.

A handful of these plants were available at our monsoon sale, and we are offering them again this month at the annual Fall Sale. It will be a great opportunity to get this special plant without having to worry about the poison ivy!

Jim Verrier
Director of Plant Nursery



Arizona blackberry



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Program Services Report

Wow, it's fall again! If it's true that "time just flies when you're having fun," we've had a whole lot of fun since the Spring Sale! It certainly has been busy in Program Services.

In **Adult Services**, some staff have recently departed. It's always hard to say goodbye to our dedicated workers, but we're pleased that the new team is one of our best ever; they've had a very positive impact on our employees with disabilities. Lately, there's been an extra spark between Program Services and Nursery staff. There has always been teamwork, but with the good relationships that have developed and better knowledge of each others' jobs, the teamwork has improved exponentially. Desert Survivors is an amazing, wonderful place to work, with equally amazing, wonderful people. If only the whole world could take a lesson from us!

In **Children's Services**, we recently welcomed two new staff members; both are skilled early-intervention workers, both bilingual in Spanish and English, which allows us to serve more

Spanish-speaking families. They've been a much-welcome addition to our professional team. We have also had a new addition to our Family. Miss Emily arrived safely on St. Patrick's Day to one of our early-intervention staff members, Brooke, and her husband, Jim.



Miss Emily

Emily, their fourth child, was born with Tar Syndrome—a very rare syndrome for which both parents have to carry the gene. When Emily was born, they were told that they had a one-in-four chance of any of their children inheriting this condition and, as I said, Miss Emily is number four, but the first with Tar Syndrome.

Emily was born missing the two lower bones in both her arms. She has her upper arms and elbows and then her hands. Emily

also cannot make platelets, which are the component of blood that helps it clot. Usually by the second birthday, this condition corrects itself, but right now Emily needs blood transfusions about once a week. Emily is also receiving early-intervention services, as her platelet count puts her at risk for brain bleeds. The focus is on occupational therapy for her hands, as well as observation for sudden changes in development that could indicate a brain bleed. Between her occupational therapist and her mom, Emily is in excellent hands, and they are exploring treatments for Emily's condition with specialists in the field. We are so proud of Brooke, as she continues to work with Desert Survivors families. Having Emily in our family has made all of us at Desert Survivors even more empathetic with the families we work with.

As always, I look forward to seeing you at our fall sale. You will find me at the cash register. Although my plant knowledge is very limited, I am always happy to answer questions about Program Services!

Karen Wilson
Director of Program Services

VISIT OUR WEBSITE:
desertsurvivors.org

MEMBERSHIP: \$50/yr
- newsletter semiannually
- 10% off plant purchases all year
- members' day sale entry

DIRECTORY

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DESERT SURVIVORS is a unique human service agency founded in 1981 in and for the Tucson community. Desert Survivors is a nonprofit organization combining the appreciation and preservation of the Sonoran Desert with innovative and effective services to enhance the lives of people with disabilities.

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