Expanding the Southwestern plant palette©

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INTRODUCTION

Exploring in habitat for plants to introduce to the nursery and landscape industry in the desert southwest can be a hit-and-miss proposition. Sometimes the plants that appear to have the most promising potential end up being a bust, while other plants that are almost an afterthought turn out to be some of the best performers in the landscape.

When searching areas for potential new plants outside of southern Arizona, I have identified two approaches in order to maximize the hits and minimize the misses. One is to identify a climate similar to the one in which you want to introduce "new and unusual" plants and go scour that region for potential plants. The other is to pick plants that already do well in said climate, find out where those are native, and go look for other plants in that area.

I would like to share some of the winners and not-yet-winners chosen from over 30 years of exploring in Mexico. Let's take an alphabetical look at some awesome plants that have made their way into the landscape plant palette.

THE WINNERS

Agave ovatifolia

This amazing agave was first found in the state of Nuevo Leon in northeastern Mexico by Texas plantsman Lynn Lowery in the mid-1980s and distributed to various individuals and institutions in Texas without much fanfare. About 15 years after he first collected the plant, I was sent a picture of one of them and asked which agave it could be. By the time I received the picture, Mr. Lowery was no longer alive, and recognizing that it was an undescribed species, I spoke with his son-in-law who gave me the details of Mr. Lowery's excursions to Nuevo Leon. The story is that Mr. Lowery met the Chief of Police for the town of Lampazos in Nuevo Leon, who owned a ranch in the Sierra Lampazos. He gave Mr. Lowery access to the ranch which was, and still is, home to a treasure trove of very cool plants, one of which is *Agave ovatifolia*. Mr. Lowery brought back either seed or small plants (the story is unclear) which he distributed around Texas. Fifteen years later, I contacted Jose Angel Villarreal, a botanist in Monterrey, Mexico, about the possibility of meeting up and attempting to find the Chief of Police (long retired by 2000) and obtaining permission to visit the ranch and the agaves. Ron Gass was kind enough to gather me up and drive over with me to make that happen, and Jose Angel and I formally described the plant, giving it the name *Agave ovatifolia*.

Anisacanthus quadrifidus

This medium-sized shrub with vibrant orange-red flowers is a hummingbird magnet. Ron Gass and I spotted this plant while racing along Mexico Highway 57 south of Saltillo, Mexico. The rich green leaves and show-stopping flowers were enough to make Ron screech to a stop (when it was safe, of course), turn the truck around, and regress to the plants so we could collect a few cuttings to grow and test in Phoenix and Tucson. The species has proven to be a winner for the desert southwest.

Buddleja marrubiifolia

Originally introduced by University of Arizona Professor Warren Jones, this shrub is one of the most drought tolerant plants on the market today. Shrubs in habitat are not much to write home about, but when used in the landscape the plant has a beauty and look unlike

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any other.

Cordia boissieri

This Chihuahuan Desert native is a large shrub that is frequently trained as a small tree. When in flower, the plant will stand out among other shrubs in the native habitat, and when used in a landscape, it is an eye-catching plant. In 1981, while working for University of Arizona, Professor Warren Jones and I traveled to the Falcon Dam area of south Texas to look for Tamaulipan plants that spilled across the Rio Grande and entered the Texas landscape. We came across several of these trees that were growing in grassy areas along the road leading to the dam. Stopping at one of them, we found numerous seedlings and dug some from the deep, rich south Texas soil. These survived the week-long return and were planted into 1-gal containers. They were grown on and eventually planted on the University of Arizona campus where some of them still thrive today.

Dalea capitata

This low-growing perennial to sub-shrub is a good example of a nondescript plant in habitat becoming one of the better landscape plants for the arid southwest. Ron Gass and I were traveling down Mexico Highway 57 south of Saltillo, Mexico, when he noticed a police car driving on the road. Ron, being the cautious man he is, signaled and pulled over to the side of the road to avoid any possibility of wrongdoing and so we could look at plants. While I was busy taking a few photos, Ron quietly made a few cuttings of this low-growing, roadside plant. A while after our return to Arizona, Ron brought me a couple of the plants that he had grown. One of them turned out to be this spectacular *Dalea* that we informally dubbed "policeman's *Dalea*", named for the fortuitous stop precipitated by the appearance of the policeman.

Dalea frutescens

This is one of those Gomer Pyle plants that make you stop and say "golly" after seeing it in peak bloom during the cooler fall months. In the early 1980s, my wife Carol and I took a trip to southern New Mexico and west Texas where we did some camping and sightseeing. We found a wonderful little, out-of-the-way spot to camp in the Davis Mountains of west Texas, and while looking around at the plants, I spotted one that appeared to be a *Dalea*. I proceeded to collect a handful of seeds which I later grew and identified as *Dalea frutescens*. It rewards the patient gardener with a flurry of flowers as the weather cools in the fall.

Dasylirion quadrangulatum

Long misidentified as *Dasylirion longissimum*, the name was finally clarified by Dr. David Bogler in 1998. In 1986, Ron Gass and I were in southern Tamaulipas, looking for the town of Miquihuana and *Leucophyllum revolutum,* when we saw hundreds upon hundreds of these plants dotting the hillsides. At that time, the road was dirt and went up the valley between the hills. We stopped when we figured we were as close as we would get to the plants, which were heavily laden with seed. We were able to gather some seed and grow many plants that have since found their way into landscapes throughout the southwest.

Nolina nelsonii

On that same trip in 1986, Ron and I first came upon these tall plants that resembled blue-leaved yuccas, but had no flowers to aid our identification of them. A few miles further down the road we spotted a plant loaded with seed and realized that it was a *Nolina* and not a yucca. We combined our heights by having me climb upon Ron's shoulders, and in doing so we were able to gather some seed. This seed was subsequently grown and then planted at their yard in Cochise County and used for seed production.

Yucca rostrata

Ron Gass and I collected seed of this amazing accent plant in northeastern Mexico on our 1986 trip and it has been a huge success in the landscape industry. We selected this

outstanding population for its mostly tall, single-stemmed plants with narrow, flexible leaves.

THE NOT-QUITE-YET WINNERS

Cowania plicata

This is another very attractive Chihuahuan Desert shrub with rose-pink flowers. I have seen this plant several times, just not at the right time to gather any seed, and hope to one day be there at the right time so this can be tested in the desert southwest for its landscape potential. It grows in the dry regions of the Chihuahuan Desert and is found alongside other plants that have proven to be good performers in our area, which indicates this one ought to grow well here also.

Galphimia glauca

I first saw this plant on a 1986 trip to northeastern Mexico while Ron Gass and I were camped out in southern Tamaulipas. The area was filled with fascinating plants, from the tallest yuccas to the smallest cactus, but one of the plants that caught our eye was this shrub with its spikes of bright yellow flowers rising above the dark green foliage. This Chihuahuan Desert shrub is still being trialed in southern Arizona, but it has performed quite admirably and is worth adding to the plant palette in the desert southwest.

Hedeoma ciliolata

While on a trip in October 2001 with Carl and Wade from Yucca Do Nursery, we drove out to a very dry gypsum-laden hillside dotted with this wonderful little perennial plant, which did not have any seed on it at the time. My next encounter with this plant was in June 2006, and again the plants were in bloom and no seed was to be found. I finally was able to gather a small bit of seed in January 2009 while traveling to the region with fellow plant enthusiast, Scott Calhoun. I was familiar enough with the particular hill that we were able to find the plants after dark and collected a few seeds by flashlight. Three separate growers received some of the seed and none were able to get the plants past the seedling stage. This one certainly qualifies as a not-yet-winner and needs to be tested again.

***Scutellaria* species**

I collected cuttings of this undescribed species during a June 2006 trip. There were just a handful of plants growing in the limestone of a vertical road cut in the state of Hidalgo, Mexico. I was attracted to the bright red flowers set against the rich green foliage and was hoping that it would be a spectacular groundcover in landscapes of the desert southwest. I have tried growing this plant at least three times in my landscape, and have had trouble getting it established. Judging by the condition in which it grows, my first inclination was that it would not need a lot of water, and so treated it that way. Planting in full sun and in partial shade, I could not keep the soil moist enough to get the plant established. I finally put one in the well of a peach tree and it has become established, but I believe it is in too much shade to flower. My next test will be in the well of a deciduous fruit tree or on the south side of one to get more sunlight on the plant.

Zinnia juniperifolia

This is a lovely little sub-shrubby plant from slightly higher elevations in the Chihuahuan Desert Region. This is another plant that has been tough to establish in the landscape, but certainly worthy of continued testing. The orange flowers are unusual for a desert-adapted plant, yet the plant should mix nicely with big, bold accent plants and perennials with purple flowers. I will have to seek out more seed to give this another trial in the landscape.

This is just a snapshot of some of the successes and not-yet-successes from the past 30+ years of traveling the arid lands of the southwestern United States and northern Mexico.