

BEAUTIFUL DESERT BUSHES ENHANCE LANDSCAPE

By Brenda Olive, Desert Awareness Committee
Advocates for the preservation of our Sonoran Desert

Our desert is not just cacti. It has full lush bushes that add color and sustainability to our desert. They provide erosion control and keep the ground underneath them moist and cool for its survival as well as a place for birds and animals to take cover. Birds and insects benefit from nectar in the blossoms, and the animals (yes even humans) enjoy the fruits and seeds.

Some shrubs such as **Fairy Duster** and **Chuparosa** are enjoyed by the hummingbirds. Chuparosa means “hummingbird” in Spanish. The **Creosote (Chaparral)** bush is the oldest plant in the desert with a life span of 12,000 years. The waxy coating on its leaves prevents moisture lost, and the vast root system allows it to flourish in our harsh desert environment. After a rain, its fragrant foliage permeates the desert with a musty odor. It is called the “desert pharmacy” because of its many medicinal uses by Native Americans that we still use today.

Another adaptive bush with a life span of 400 years is the **Jojoba** with leathery gray-green leaves. The male has a ball or cluster of flowers rich in pollen, and the female produces the nuts that early settlers used as a coffee substitute. The nuts are harvested in late July or early August and contain seed oil, which is a liquid wax that can be pressed out and used as a valuable lubricant.

Another fruit-bearing bush called the **Wolfberry** is the desert’s “goji” berry. The egg-shaped reddish-orange fruit is high in antioxidants and ready to harvest in early May, but it can flower and fruit several times in a year. It can be enjoyed in a salad or with a breakfast cereal. However, this bush drops its leaves during the summer until the rains come. Don’t worry if it appears to look dead as this is an adaptation to its survival.

The **Brittlebush** has silver-gray leaves with an abundance of daisy-like flowers that bloom winter to spring. This is the bush you see along the roadside with its brilliant yellow leaves. Its seed pods are nourishment for the birds.

Our **Ocotillo** is a bush and not a cactus. Most of the year the canes are leafless. However, bright green leaves appear after a rain. Then clusters of red tubular flowers appear at the tips from March to June, which are edible, raw or cooked. The Ocotillo can live up to two centuries, and never needs maintenance.

And last but not least is the **Bursage**, referred to as the “lynch-pin” of the Sonoran Desert because it stabilizes the soil and acts as a nurse plant for seedlings and cacti, such as Saguaros that grow in its shade. It is highly drought-tolerant and is good for naturalistic plantings. Many birds including the Quail and Cactus Wren enjoy the seeds of the burs during the summer when there is little to feed on.

Have you ever heard of “Xeriscape Landscaping”? When I moved here from Indiana 40 years ago, I was thrilled to not have grass to mow or bushes to trim and leaves to rake. Our bushes are slow growers with small leaves as an adaptation to only 8-12 inches of rain annually in the

desert. We know that the bigger the leaves, the more water a plant needs. You will see photos of lush Creosote, Jojoba and Chuparosa bushes that not only don't require watering or being hooked up to a drip system, they don't need trimming...ever! Bushes such as the Jojoba and Wolfberry flower in the spring and their fruits follow a few months later. Our bushes and trees also need cover from the hot summer sun, so I would be careful to trim them back during a time when they won't suffer from "sun scald". Nature knows how to take care of itself!

HOWEVER, here come the landscapers with their electric clippers to shape our beautiful bushes into balls or teacups, robbing them of their new flower buds and fresh green leaves. These shapes are not attractive, and do not reflect the integrity of the plant. Only a few years ago, we could admire the bushes in all their natural glory throughout the year. Now, there is a systemic issue with "Imprudent Pruning" of our native trees and bushes, which does more harm than good.

This issue caught the attention of the Desert Botanical Gardens this past spring, and they held many training sessions for landscapers. The DBG has been teaching pruning courses since it started in the 1930's. When improper pruning is performed, such as "shrub shaping", the plant uses its energy to replenish leaves where it was cut altering the natural shape. Then this pruning takes place multiple times a year further exacerbating the problem with a dense woody plant on the inside that no longer has leaves. The inside doesn't get sunlight, or the wind blowing through it to keep it cool. The plant's shape is not only altered forever, but it is stressed and dies.

I've seen plants cut down to the ground with only sticks coming out of the ground. Have you observed our medians or an HOA's landscaping work? Do you see what I'm talking about? I thought a landscapers' job was to maintain plants to look natural and healthy. Is it lack of training or knowledge of these plants? Please refer to the photos I have taken. I don't think the plants look aesthetically pleasing at all, and the plants may not come back. So how often do our plants need to be trimmed you ask? Rarely! The real reasons for pruning are for safety and accessibility. And when they do, you trim dead branches from the bottom with manual cutters keeping the original shape of the bush. Doesn't that make more sense? So don't let the landscapers sell you a "maintenance plan" with multiple visits. It is a waste of your money, and the plants will suffer and die when they could outlive you! You may decide to contact a certified arborist who has the knowledge of the best methods to trim trees and bushes.

Did you know that the green waste going into the landfills is at an all-time high? The branches I see in the landscapers' trucks are mostly healthy green branches, and that's what the landfill representatives see. The staff at the Maricopa County Waste Resources & Recycling tell me that the cost to process the green waste is so high that they cannot accept green waste year-round. They say this is a major issue for multiple agencies in the valley. They are currently only accepting green waste during the last 2 weeks in January, April, July and October. Or is it really "waste"? Why are the landscapers cutting out so much healthy growth, leaving the plant 50% of its original size, or less? And then they come back a few months later to cut back more. This is not acceptable! Will you help save the Sonoran Desert from such devastation of our beautiful bushes? If you have landscapers scheduled, be sure you meet them to walk your property and instruct them on which trees and/or bushes need trimming. Define what "trimming" means to you. Tell them to leave the electric trimmers in their truck!

Photos to attach:



Brittlebush left natural



Bursage left natural



trimmed

Chuparosa never



Jojoba shaped in a ball



Chuparosa dead inside



Bird of Paradise clippings in the foreground & plant left naked of healthy branches in the background.



Chuparosa stripped of its branches



Chuparosa clippings



Bushes unrecognizable



Healthy Creosote Bush