

# Desert Survivors

NURTURING PLANTS AND PEOPLE SINCE 1981

MARCH 2008

## Satintail grass, elusive, majestic, and disappearing...

I first became aware of *Imperata brevifolia* (Satintail grass) at an Arizona Native Plant Society talk given by Richard Felger—noted botanist, grass specialist, and author—about two years ago. He spoke on native grasses of the Sonoran Desert, and my interest peaked when he mentioned that the population of Satintail grass in Sabino Canyon represented the only known location of that species in the Sonoran Desert ecosystem. At that time, it had been reduced to a small colony being aggressively crowded out by the invasive exotic Bermuda grass (*Cynodon dactylon*). At one time, Satintail populations in the Santa Catalina Mountains also thrived in Bear and Romero Canyons. Unfortunately, the plants in those canyons already had been



David Mechlecht

One of our Sabino Canyon *Imperata b. mother plants*

buried under many feet of debris following the Aspen Fire and subsequent floods, which presumably wiped out these populations (with no known sightings in these areas in

more than ten years). The last remaining colony in Sabino Canyon, to which Dr. Felger referred, was destroyed due to flooding during the summer of 2006, when it was covered with six feet of sand and the course of the stream shifted. It is known from seven other localities in Arizona, however; among them, the Grand Canyon, Lake Havasu Canyon, Parker Canyon Lake, Sonoita Creek, and the Pajarito Mountains of southern Arizona.

So, what is Satintail? *Imperata brevifolia* is a sizeable perennial grass native to the Southwest and northern Mexico, approximately three to five feet tall with stunning, white, silky inflorescences (flowering spikes) from six to eight inches long rising above the blade clump. In Arizona it prefers rocky canyons, and



Fred Hrusa/USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database

typically grows within a meter of a streambed in shady, lush conditions—often beside small pools in canyon bottoms. Under good conditions, it can spread somewhat from underground rhizomes, but is so habitat-specific that its colonies never get too large. It would be a handsome addition to residential landscapes in southern Arizona.

Not surprisingly, a lot of inaccurate information can be found about this plant on the internet and elsewhere. A negative portrayal first took root in the 1930s in California, when government employees were on the lookout for potentially invasive plants. A population of *Imperata* near Los Angeles was bulldozed to put up a bridge, and when it

*continued on page 3*

## Spring Plant Sale



### public sale

March 15th & 16th

**SAT. 8-5 & SUN. 10-5**

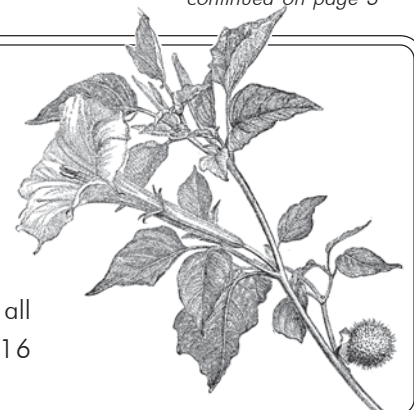
10% off on all purchases  
& no sales tax

### member day

March 8th

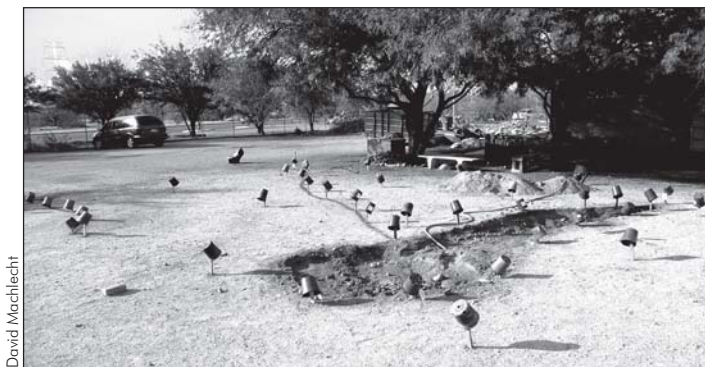
**Sat., 8-5**

Members get 20% off all  
purchases March 8-16



## Nursery Director's Report

First, I want you to know that last year's fall sale was our most successful sale to date, and we are extremely appreciative of all of your support, which made it such a success. Now, after selling so many plants, we are busy playing catch-up, growing more trees, shrubs, vines, and cacti to replenish our stock. We are also germinating many of the special seeds we collected on field trips last fall, so there should be many new additions to our species inventory later this summer. With the well-timed rains this winter, it may also be a good spring in the desert, and, hopefully, we will have more successful seed-collection trips this season.



David Machlecht

Early preparations for our Tucson Mountain Park demo garden.

After taking a brief break from working on demo gardens in 2007, we jumped back in this winter and have just completed our new **Arizona Grassland** garden. We have also started laying out a new **Chihuahuan Desert** demo garden along the outside fence, and have dug

and planted in about half of a **Santa Rita Mountain** graywater garden. In addition, ground has finally been broken in our massive **Tucson Mountain** garden area, which at this stage I find myself referring to as "Egypt," due to its rather ambitious size and the colossal amount

of work involved. Still, we're plenty motivated. It has been great fun to watch our previous demo gardens take off and provide wildlife and pollinator habitat.

Another nursery project we're excited about does not involve dirt and cellulose; **David Machlecht**, one of our nursery staff, has laboriously compiled a large, informative database of more than 400 species of plants that we grow. And with the assistance of **Bill Singleton**, we are updating our website. The plant database will soon be online—nice job, Dave and Bill!

**Jim Verrier**

Director of Plant Nursery

## Featured Plants for Spring Sale

**Imperata brevifolia** (Satintail grass):

A bunchgrass, three to five feet tall, with gorgeous, large white flowering tops (inflorescences) in the late summer/fall. A riparian grass requiring medium to high water use in home landscapes. Prefers partial shade and fair to good drainage. Mulch heavily. Takes water, but is very "cool," rare in cultivation and in the wild. (No longer believed extant in the Santa Catalina Mountains; see feature article.)



David Machlecht

*Tithonia fruticosa*

**Tithonia fruticosa** (Mexican sunflower):

Ever popular yet hard to find in nurseries. Large shrub from five to eight feet tall and wide. Large, fuzzy leaves with huge yellow sunflowers nearly four inches in diameter, blooming in late summer and into fall. Extremely ornamental and striking when in bloom. Attracts butterflies and native bees. The seeds are eaten by cardinals, grosbeaks, and scrubjays. Takes full or partial sun, and moderate water. Somewhat frost sensitive, it needs to be planted close to a wall or house for protection. Native to Mexico.



Linda Brewer

*Acourtia wrightii*

**Acourtia wrightii** (Perezia, brownfoot):

A beautiful spring bloomer with attractive clusters of pinkish lavender flowers about three-quarters of an inch wide. Loved by butterflies. Small- to medium-sized shrub from two to three feet tall with dark green, toothed leaves. Prefers partial shade, good understory. Medium to low water use. Native locally in foothills surrounding Tucson at low elevations.



**Stevia lemmonii** (Santa Catalina sugarleaf):

Cold-hardy, small to medium-sized shrub reaching two feet or more. Early spring bloomer with dense clusters of tubular white flowers up to two inches wide, reminiscent of Baby's breath – unique. Its attractive foliage has a sweet fragrance. Prefers partial shade, and medium-low water usage. Handles a variety of soil conditions. (Related to the popular sugar substitute, but this species is not edible). Indigenous around Tucson in the Santa Catalina and Rincon Mountains.

## Executive Director's Report

It's spring again in the Sonoran Desert, and all is well at Desert Survivors. You can read about our newest projects in the articles in this issue, but I have an observation that I want to share. In watching local news and weather broadcasts on television last winter, I often noticed newscasters expressing displeasure over forecasts of rain. They are displeased that it might rain on a weekend, or rain on some event. When I see this, I can't help but vent my exasperation, audibly, at those talking heads. (Later I remember they can't hear me!)

If it rains in the desert, you are supposed to drop to your knees and thank God. We are in a drought that has lasted more than 10 years. Even with "all" the rain we got last year, it still didn't amount to our 12-inches-per-year average rainfall.

If you find it hard to imagine that Arizona's suffering from a drought, let me tell you a little story. About five years ago I was riding my Harley in northern Arizona. I was heading north into Flagstaff the back way, through a ranger

station called "Happy Jack." (It's an incredibly beautiful stretch of road!) I knew that about twenty miles outside of Flagstaff, I'd catch the southern end of Mormon Lake, which connects to Lake Mary. When I got to this place, Mormon Lake wasn't there! I rode several miles before seeing any water that indicated a lake was there at all. That's what a long-term drought does. And that was five years ago! I don't want to imagine the place now. Maybe you can't tell there is a drought as you drive around Tucson, but if you get outside of town, you can see the effects all too well.

Anyway, the Spring Sale will soon be upon us, and we're looking forward to seeing all of our friends. "Growing Native" has never been more important to our desert home. Please continue to conserve water any way you can. Remember; never complain about *any* chance of rain! See you at the sale.

**Rich Bechtold**  
Executive Director



rows of potted Satintail growing out for the sale.

### Satintail, cont. from page 1

suddenly returned from its rhizomes (undercover runners that sprout new plants), this grass was labeled as a troublemaker and demoted to the California Noxious Weed List—under the assumption that it was not native. Not until embarrassing footnotes were published in the *Flora of North America* (Vol. 25, 2003) did the State of California reconsider their blunder. By this time, the plant remained only in small, isolated populations in four canyons in that state—prompting its move from the Noxious

Weed List to the Rare Plant List! Even that edition of *Flora of North America* erroneously listed that *Imperata brevifolia* only occurred within the Grand Canyon. We have already noted several extant populations in Arizona, but we can certainly agree that the populations are shrinking and that its habitat is becoming challenged by climate change.

We are proud to offer plants at our spring sale that will charm grass enthusiasts as well as contribute to species preservation. Our current Satintail germplasm (genetic

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### GARDENING IS FOR THE BIRDS



MARCH 11

Tuesday

9 a.m. - noon

A Tucson Audubon Society Tour of Desert Survivors, led by Janine McCabe.

### ARIZONA NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY BOOK SALE

MARCH 15

Saturday, morning only  
ANPS sets up shop at Desert Survivors on the first day of the public Plant Sale.

### WILD IN THE CITY ANPS YARD TOUR

APRIL 12

Saturday,

9 a.m. - 4 p.m.

Desert Survivors is one of six locations on display during this tour emphasizing pollinator and wildlife habitat.



locality) is from the Patagonia/Sonoita Creek area. However, we are tremendously pleased that we also have two healthy mother plants that we grew out from a dozen seeds Richard Felger donated from his last collection of *Imperata* in Sabino Canyon (2005). We look forward to working with the U.S. Forest Service on a reintroduction in Sabino Canyon when the time is right. We also expect to make plants from this special Sabino Canyon population available for sale in the not so distant future.

**Jim Verrier**  
Director of Plant Nursery



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Tucson, AZ 85713

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## Program Services Report

It's time for another Spring Plant Sale, and I do believe each year they come around faster than the last. We have had a great winter season in Program Services. No big changes in **Children's Services** yet! We are still waiting for "Redesign" to come around and make some significant changes to how we provide services to families across Pima County for birth to three-year-old children. Redesign is a project coming out of the Arizona Early Intervention Program's central office. Currently they are phasing in a new model for delivering early intervention services that will eventually be adopted across the state. In the meantime we continue to ensure the services we provide are the best possible for these special little ones.

In **Adult Services** we are very busy getting the ground ready for a huge demonstration garden project in front of our Program Services building. Everyone is really anxious to start planting. We are also excited about getting three new up-potting stations, which are being built for our

disabled adults to do more up-potting. We are really trying to return to our roots and focus on the very basics of gathering seeds, propagating, and growing native plants. We still have five crews, two of which work on special projects while the other three keep the up-potting stations productive. These three



crews will be growing mesquite trees from seed. We plan to start with a dozen for each crew and see what success we have.

**Studio Taj** is in full swing. We are currently working on signs for our demonstration gardens and we will soon be

building a few benches, which we hope to have ready for the spring sale. Thank you *all* for your continued support. Once again, I will be at the register on sale weekend. Unfortunately, I will miss member Saturday for the first time in many years, as I will be visiting my mum in England, but I hope to see many of you at the BIG public sale.

**Karen Wilson**  
Director of Program Services

VISIT OUR WEBSITE:  
[desertsurvivors.org](http://desertsurvivors.org)

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

## DIRECTORY

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791-9309

### Karen Wilson

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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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