Reflections from the Executive Director

It’s hard to find one word to describe the last six months. Who would have thought back in March that the months ahead would see such life-altering changes—certainly not I. Yet here we are, and through it all, Desert Survivors is still surviving (and thriving!) thanks to our loyal members, customers, employees, board members, and families—everyone who plays a part in making Desert Survivors the amazing company it is. I couldn’t be prouder and more honored. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

In this update, I could talk about the difficulties we’ve faced or the people we’ve said good-bye to along the way since March, but I’d rather talk about the light that’s come out of these dark times. Nowhere is the proverbial phrase “When life gives you a lemon, make lemonade” truer than at Desert Survivors. We make it work for the people we serve and care about. As our former executive director and my dear friend Richard Bechtold once said, “Desert Survivors is the company too tough to die.”

I could say that’s a miracle (and maybe it is), but I also believe that it’s a result of being proactive and committed to our cause.

These practices are evident in our approach to the pandemic. Jim brought the potential risks of COVID-19 to my attention long before it became a daily news story. We started stockpiling PPE supplies and sanitizers. While many people were searching for a roll of toilet paper, we were already well stocked on all paper supplies. In fact, our conference room became supply central! In an effort to keep our staff and customers safe and healthy, we made masks mandatory. We also closed the nursery for two months, moving to online curbside pickup sales—which were a huge success. Our actions have paid off: throughout this pandemic, we haven’t had a single case of COVID-19 at Desert Survivors. There are certainly things we could have done better—there’s always room for improvement—but our hard work has certainly paid off.

Knowing that the Stonewall Foundation had our back gave us a wonderful sense of security. Foundation president Rick Small reached out to us and all their recipients with a helping hand, reminding us that, “You have a STONE WALL behind you.” Although we did not have to take them up on this offer, we are appreciative of their continued generous support.

Our corner at Starr Pass and Santa Cruz is a diverse little world made up of people from all walks of life. We do our best to accept everyone for who they are and how they come to us—a practice I believe gives us a true sense of family and community. Each of you reading this is a part of our world, and we thank you for it. Come enjoy what you’ve helped build at our special extended plant sale. I look forward to greeting you at the entrance on September 19!

Karen Wilson
Executive Director

Fall Plant Sale

Members Sale
Sept. 19 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
20% off to members

Public Sale
Sept. 22–Oct. 3 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
10% off to public
20% off to members

Coryphantha maiz-tablasensis
**Featured Plants Fall 2020**

*Parkinsonia x sonorae*  
Sonoran palo verde (Fabaceae)

We’re excited to offer this rarely available tree species native to Sonora, Mexico, for the first time! While the Desert Museum hybrid is popular among the palo verdes, it is highly susceptible to palo verde root borer beetles (*Derobrachus hovorei*), develops unsightly insect damage on the trunk over time, and is a three-way hybrid involving an invasive nonnative South American species (*P. aculeata*). The hybrid Sonoran palo verde, a cross of the foothill palo verde (*P. microphylla*) and the palo brea (*P. praecox*), doesn’t have these problems—it’s a stable, naturally occurring hybrid. It will reach 15 to 18 feet in height and often will be thornless or have just one slender spine per leaflet cluster along the branches. The hybrid Sonoran palo verde is best planted in full sun and requires low water once established. Mature specimens maintain an attractive green trunk. Flowers are similar to the palo brea with brighter yellow blooms, serve as a larval host for many species of Lycaenid butterflies (blues), and provide copious amounts of nectar to pollinators. Soft, immature seeds are highly edible and are likely to be quite tasty due to the tree’s lineage. We highly recommend taking advantage of this limited-time offering!

*Schizachyrium sanguineum var. birtiflorum*

Crimson bluestem (Poaceae)

Southeastern Arizona hosts a vast diversity of perennial native grass species, especially within the Sky Islands. Crimson bluestem is native to the Arizona Sky Islands and occurs between 4,000 and 7,000 feet. The key to cultivation at lower elevations is to provide augmented drainage and a few hours of afternoon shade. Members of the genus *Schizachyrium* are typically referred to as bluestem, but all are highly ornamental as the foliage turns brilliant colors in the fall. Crimson bluestem is no exception, boasting orange-red leaf blades that persist during winter dormancy. Showy flowers form during monsoon season, with purple female parts (stigmas) and yellow male parts (anthers). Crimson bluestem is an upright grass species that typically reaches 3 feet tall and half as wide. It can be planted next to compatible species to provide an attractive vertical element. Plants require medium to low water usage. We’re also offering *S. cirratum* (Texas bluestem), the other native bluestem grass from the Arizona Sky Islands that’s subtly different from Crimson bluestem.

*Gutierrezia sarothrae*  
Snakeweed (Asteraceae)

In recognition of one of the hottest and driest summers on record, it seemed highly appropriate to feature one plant that’s brutally tough and drought-tolerant. A medium-sized rounded shrub to about 3 feet around, *G. sarothrae* is widespread throughout the western United States and occurs across a wide elevational gradient (1,000 feet to 7,000 feet). Plants erupt in mid- to late summer, becoming covered in a show of bright yellow blooms. Unfortunately, like many other beneficial native plants, this beautiful shrub is often overlooked as a garden planting or viewed as a range pest. However, perhaps its incredible resiliency to the Southwest’s brutal summer heat waves and human disturbance will motivate some to reconsider its horticultural value. Snakeweed provides valuable nectar for pollinators in the summer; is a larval host for nearly a half-dozen species of moth caterpillars, including owlets, leafrollers, and pyralids; and acts as a larval source to a species of leaf beetles (Chrysomelidae). It’s the perfect time to plant something super hardy and xeric like Snakeweed.
Coryphantha compacta or palmeri

Common name (Cactaceae)
A highly variable species with many forms differentiated by geography throughout Chihuahua, Tamaulipas, and Durango, Mexico, Coryphantha compacta and Coryphantha palmeri are taxonomically synonymous. C. palmeri is distinguished by the presence of a stout, hooked, often black-tipped central spine, while C. compacta has clusters made up of just radial spines. Like other Coryphantha species, these central spines can take years to develop before finally giving the cactus its distinct form. Solitary, globose stems tend to cluster as the cactus ages, especially in cultivation. The large, pale yellow flowers have displayed a handsome glow here at the nursery. Traditionally, they’ve been used by the Tarahumara people as a medicinal and ceremonial plant. These six-year-old cacti will be offered for the first time, but just six plants will be available, so hurry down to take advantage of this unique offering!

Cactus Offerings
Over the last several years, Desert Survivors has been growing a number of the 50 plus Coryphantha cactus. We’re proud to share a selection of 15 species during our fall sale. Most are older specimens, ranging in age from 5 years to 10 years old. The following will be making their debut, but in limited quantities: C. cornifera, C. longicornis, and C. scheeri. Start your collection today!

Nate MacDonald, Assistant Nursery Director

Teammates
In this newsletter, we’d like to introduce two more employees of the Desert Survivors team: Operations Director Mireya Valenzuela and Case Manager Chris Hongiesto. Mireya is responsible for tracking time sheets, preparing payroll, billing the government, and ensuring that each department stays within its budget. If Karen is out of town, Mireya is in charge! Chris covers a wide range of duties that include file management, maintenance of the Desert Survivors website and social media accounts, and quality assurance for our organization. He can also step in as a mentor to assist when another mentor is out. Both Mireya and Chris keep us on task and make the community aware of what we’re doing, and we couldn’t do what we do here at Desert Survivors without them.

Mireya.
Este ha sido un año difícil, que ha implicado mucho aprendizaje en todo el mundo. As pesar de los desafíos planteados por la pandemia, Desert Survivors se ha adaptado a la nueva normalidad para poder seguir brindando un excelente servicio tanto a nuestros miembros como a nuestros clientes. Seguiremos haciéndolo con gran ilusión y profesionalidad con la que nos hemos caracterizado. ¡Gracias por su apoyo—realmente lo apreciamos!

Chris.
What strikes me most about Desert Survivors is the relative obscurity it exists in within the Tucson community—despite the enormous impact it has on its members’ daily lives. I myself wasn’t aware of the amazing results the horticulture therapy and retail nursery have on our employees with I/DD and the Tucson community when I came onboard 10 months ago, but the experience has truly humbled me. Helping to fulfill Desert Survivors’ mission has easily become one of the most rewarding in my life. I’m so proud of the work we do here, and I’m so grateful to call the people I work with my friends.
Program Services

Desert Survivors continues to thrive despite the challenges we’ve faced this year. In fact, we’ve remained busier than ever, so I want to say a big thank you for your ongoing support.

As if the Arizona heat isn’t enough to deal with, this year we were hit with a pandemic! This was a big curveball for all of us, affecting our routine, and causing us to adapt so we could perform our jobs. But we have some extraordinary, brave people who continued to show up and accept the challenges that lay ahead of them every single day. I’m proud of everyone and their ability to adapt to the CDC guidelines while still executing their tasks and serving our community.

Certain members of our team used the challenges we faced to advocate for themselves and each other to be more independent. José, Kirk, Josh, Casey, and Drake were promoted to work alongside the nursery team as it transplanted and restocked in preparation for plant sales. We couldn’t have made this move without the guidance of mentors Bruce, Nereyda, Chris, Jack, Nate, Janine, and Jim. They took these employees under their wing, helping them develop the necessary skills and a confidence and self-esteem that is off the charts.

Our team at Deserts Survivors is one-of-a-kind, and you’d be hard pressed to find another workplace like it. Our team has so much personality everyone is so unique. We thrive on relationships, so when we find our strengths and learn what works for each other, we’re that much more efficient and productive throughout the day. This is what we do at Desert Survivors: help each other, as well as our plants, grow. It’s a recipe for success! Stay safe out there, and I’ll see you at the sale.

David Garcia
Program Services Director

Now Hiring: Mentors
Call 520-884-8806 for details.