Program Services Update

It is hard to believe we are already well over half way through the year. As we celebrate thirty-five years of Desert Survivors, it feels like there is significant movement going on here. Life is about change and progress, and that’s what Desert Survivors is doing right now as we move into another phase of our existence. Here are some updates in Program Services.

Our amazing Ecology Training and Education Center Program manager, David Garcia, has been working closely with our mentors to improve their abilities to work in partnership with our wonderful employees who have disabilities. All our mentors are working in teams of two with their crews. This improves overall supervision and job performance of everyone, as there is a little more individual attention and accountability. During training and staff meetings, we have talked a lot about why we use the term “mentor.” The definition of mentor, according to our Webster’s Dictionary, is “a wise and faithful counselor who is both friend and tutor.” This is the perfect word for what we are trying to achieve with our staff. We promote respect between all our employees, disabled or not, and we value every single person employed here.

Summer has been busy with nursery production. Everyone has been active despite the intense heat of our summer days. Our partnership with “Workability” is going well. We had a teacher and her five students visiting once a week for five weeks to learn about the work and tasks in a plant nursery. All the students seemed to enjoy their time with us, and one even has asked about coming to work here.

We continue to prune, trim, and tidy up on the Pima County River Park loop trail between Irvington and Ina to keep the areas looking nice for the many people who use it. We received another phase of our existence. Here are some updates in Program Services.

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**Featured Plants Fall 2016**

**Sorghastrum nutans** (Indiangrass)

This clumpgrass is a showy addition to the garden. A well distributed prairie grass native to much of North America, Sorghastrum nutans also grows in woodlands, scrublands, and savannahs. It is common in northeastern Arizona and is re-presented in Coconino County. The clump grows to about 2 feet or more wide, and typically to about 3 feet tall. The wide leaf blades turn an attractive bluish color later in the fall, and then bluish to a rust color in winter. The flower spikes rise several feet above the plant, and are strongly yellowish. This grass needs a modest to low-volume of water, and can handle sunny locations. For as pretty as Indiangrass is, it is surprising that we seldom see it in Tucson landscapes. As is usually the case with bunch-grasses and clumpgrasses, planting several of these would look really impressive. Indiangrass makes good browse for wildlife and pets.

**Gaura coccinea** (Scarlet beeblossom)

Commonly found at mid-elevations throughout southeastern Arizona, scarlet beeblossoms are typically between 1 and 2 feet wide and high in small colonies. The gray foliage is grazed by showy white flowers that open in the early evening and fade to pink by the following morning, eventually turning a reddish hue. These delicately complex blossoms exude a fragrance—a biological expense designed to attract nocturnal pollinators like moths. Some species of Gaura in Arizona are known to be a specialized host plant for the beautiful moth caterpillar, Schinia gaurae, a spectacular flower mimic (in other words, the adult moth attempts to look like a showy version of the flower). Gaura coccinea can be found between 3,000 and 8,000 feet elevation, and it prefers partial or diffused shade, and can do well next to a shrub or tree. We highly recommend this moonflower-garden species. Several of these plants tucked into a garden create an impressive visual and olfactory experience during the monsoon.

**Jatropha cardiophylla** (Limberbush)

In the spurge family (Euphorbiaceae), limberbush is an extremely tough native perennial that is surprisingly uncommon in cultivation. This is partially due to the lack of wholesale availability, because they take a while for growers to produce, and there is little public knowledge or demand for this plant. But, as a structural element in the garden, limberbush is unique. The dark reddish-brown semi-succulent stems tend to radiate out from a central point, arching earthward slightly to form a flowing shape. Extremely xeric, it only leafs out during the summer months, but presents an attractive silhouette during its dormancy period. The triangular (and/or heart-shaped) leaves emerge in the heat of the summer, and with good rains (or water) these shiny green leaves grow large, almost tropical-looking (up to two and a half inches or so across the upper shoulder of the leaf). Very small white flowers form during the monsoon, but seed production is sporadic and minimal. Mature plants often form small colonies by root reproduction. Historically, this species has been used medicinally; its stems have been used for dental hygiene, and a tea from the stems has served as an antiseptic mouthwash. It has also been used as a dye plant. Its other common name, Sangre de Cristo, is inspired by its sap, which, though clear, dries to a deep red stain. Limberbush takes full sun, needs very little water once established, and is a wonderful accent in the yard. We have seen them in the Catalina foothills and in Ironwood National Monument, where some were nearly 5 feet tall, but in your yard, they can be kept under 3 feet and 10 feet wide. In the Tucson area, they are near the northern limit of their natural range.

**Program Services:**

We continue to work closely with our nursery staff to ensure that the work our crews do in the nursery meets the best possible standards in order to provide the public with the best product. We thank you for your continued support. If you ever have a question, please feel free to reach out to us. We look forward to seeing you at the sale.

Karen Wilson
Director of Program Services