

Perennials for the Southwest

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2006

Timber Press

ISBN 0-88192-761-9

ISBN-13:978-0-88192-761-0

312 pp, 178 color photos, 1map

7 x 9", hardcover \$29.95

Mary has done it again! Her newest book is a guide to 156 perennials that require minimal supplemental irrigation. It is suitable for gardeners from Texas through the Southwest to California. Plant descriptions start in Chapter 4 but don't begin reading there! Even the most experienced gardener can benefit from the inspired and practical design information. Also, one simply doesn't want to miss Mary's witty comments interspersed throughout.

On Plant Selection: Like all reckless gardeners I have dragged home untold numbers of plants... Some so completely resisted my garden that they did not make it through a single season.

On Taxonomy: The naming of species has baffled and bewildered gardeners and horticulturists since the entire effort began, but it is wise to remember that botanists and systematists are well-meaning and well-informed people. They are not out to make gardeners' lives a misery. They hope they are clarifying matters. Occasionally this is so...

On Garden Design: While training, talent, and experience are invaluable in any endeavor, anyone can absorb the basics, learning the guiding principles of garden design and launching a creative attack on their garden. As in other creative endeavors, most of us will manage to be adequate and have lovely, satisfying gardens. A sad minority will be completely inept, and even fewer will be brilliant making plants reside in space in ways that are truly inspired, original, and spectacular.

On Scale: Scale is where many urban gardeners lose their minds... Although it is often hard to endure the spacing necessary in a new planting, patience is advised unless you relish yanking out half of your plants within a couple of years.

On Soil: Soil is the heart and soul of a garden.

On Exposure: If you live in the desert regions be especially wary of the phrase "grow in full sun" when buying plants grown outside the region. Full sun in Phoenix, Tucson or Palm Springs, particularly in the summer, is nothing like Indianapolis or Philadelphia on their best days.

On Irrigation: The spacing of emitters is something of an art form.

On Pruning: The reasons to prune are numerous and the ways to perform successful pruning are even more numerous... Although I love the practice of pruning, I believe that most perennials are pruned much too often and far too aggressively. Every time you get the urge to prune ask yourself, "Will the plant be healthier after I prune it? Will the plant look better after I prune it?" and most importantly of all, "Does the plant really need to be pruned or am I just looking for something to do outside?" It sounds trivial but not to your plants.

Mary's plant descriptions are lively and very useful, telling the reader where to plant, when to plant, and whether to prune. She also comments on the attraction for birds and butterflies. Mary again uses her wit. I looked up some of the plants in my yard, one of which grows very well but I have never been fond of it. Mary's take on *Justicia spicigera*, or Mexican honeysuckle:

This species has quickly become popular in much of the low desert, and I must admit I wonder why. The shade of orange is garish and difficult to use, and I am not attracted to the combination of the yellowish leaves and orange flowers. It is, however a great favorite with hummingbirds. Because it sprawls and crawls so well, it will quickly fill up a shady spot in the garden.

These quotes give a hint of the humor and wit that Mary combines with her immense knowledge of desert plants. Her new book is a must read for desert gardeners and arm chair gardeners alike. (M. Norem)

