

## Boyce Thompson Arboretum: Two Miles of Paths, 50 Acres of Wildflowers, Fall Color, Sonoran Desert Plants

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Boyce Thompson Arboretum  
Superior, Arizona 85273

One of Arizona's premiere day-trips is just an hour's drive due east of downtown Phoenix: a sublime botanical garden with more than two miles of walking paths, extensive cacti collections and an artist's palette of Spring flowers and Autumnal color. Yes, wildflowers – even in this year of drought! Reports from last month by Arboretum staffers who hiked the High Trail in May reported desert phlox, unusual yellow bush penstemons, primrose, ocotillo and hedgehog cacti all blooming along the path.

June at the Arboretum is one of those “best kept secrets” you hear about in Arizona: a sublime season when the trails are open at 6:00 a.m. so visitors may walk the trails during cooler morning hours serenaded by calls of the Yellow-breasted Chat, Orioles and Vireos feeding on cactus blossoms and flitting through pomegranate hedges.

Midsummer has its own rewards – visit during July or August when Arizona's Summer rainstorms unlock the fragrance of eucalyptus oil and creosote leaves.

From May through August the Arboretum follows a Summer schedule, open daily from 6:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. There are picnic tables and charcoal grills; well-behaved pets on leashes are welcome. Summertime also brings a variety of weekend guided nature tours unavailable to winter visitors. Dragonflies await the hot weather before they begin to patrol and hunt the waters over Ayer Lake. Lizards are another group which seem to prefer the season lasting from Memorial Day through Labor Day.

Visit soon if you aren't familiar with this sublime Arizona State Park: Summer offers a chance to photograph vivid cactus blossoms on the various *Opuntia* and *Echinocereus* species and also to walk the trails on weekend guided tours with naturalists who lead themed tours such as “Edible/Medicinal Plants of the Sonoran Desert,” and “Plants-of-the-Bible.” Guided butterfly walks, dragonfly tours and even the singular Learn-Your-Lizards outings are offered monthly through September. At 2,400 feet elevation the Arboretum is situated higher than Phoenix and Tucson so the trails are cooler; even more so because of shady trees that line Queen Creek and shelter the network of trails. Summertime weekend tours depart from the visitor center lobby at 9:30 a.m. and they're included with regular daily park admission of \$7.50 for adults or \$3 for ages 5-12. For the most up-to-date event information call the recorded message phone 520.689.2811 or visit the award-winning website <http://ag.arizona.edu/bta>



Ayers Lake is a man-made reservoir that supplies water to the plants in the Arboretum and is home to several species of animals. (Jason Sampson 2002-2006. All rights reserved.)

### Dragonfly Walk

Can you name the colorful dragonflies that dart over your garden? Bring a pair of binoculars July 1 and August 5 for close-up looks at the intricately mosaic-patterned Blue-eyed Darner, or maybe the Red Rock Skimmer or other charismatic dragonflies which hunt and strafe over Ayer Lake or Queen Creek. The Arboretum is a great place to view dragonflies, just ask Arizona State Parks volunteer and tourguide Peter Moulton.

“When the temperature is a little warmer, Ayer Lake is a good place to start looking for both dragonflies and damselflies. Some species breed in still water, and at Ayer Lake these can include Blue-eyed and Common Green Darners, Flame and Roseate Skimmers; Mexican Amberwings, and Blue Dashers. The little wet area just above the lake produced what (at the time) was the first known record of Neon Skimmer for both the Arboretum and Pinal County. Cynthia Donald found this spectacular bug, which stayed just long enough for one not very good, but recognizable photograph before it disappeared.

“While some species prefer still waters for breeding purposes, and are therefore found around lakes, ponds, and the like, others favor flowing water. Queen Creek provides habitat for some of these species, and the shady spot where the trail drops into the canyon and then switches back to follow the creek downstream is excellent for both the Red Rock Skimmer and the Springwater Dancer. I’ve also seen, and photographed the American Rubyspot here.

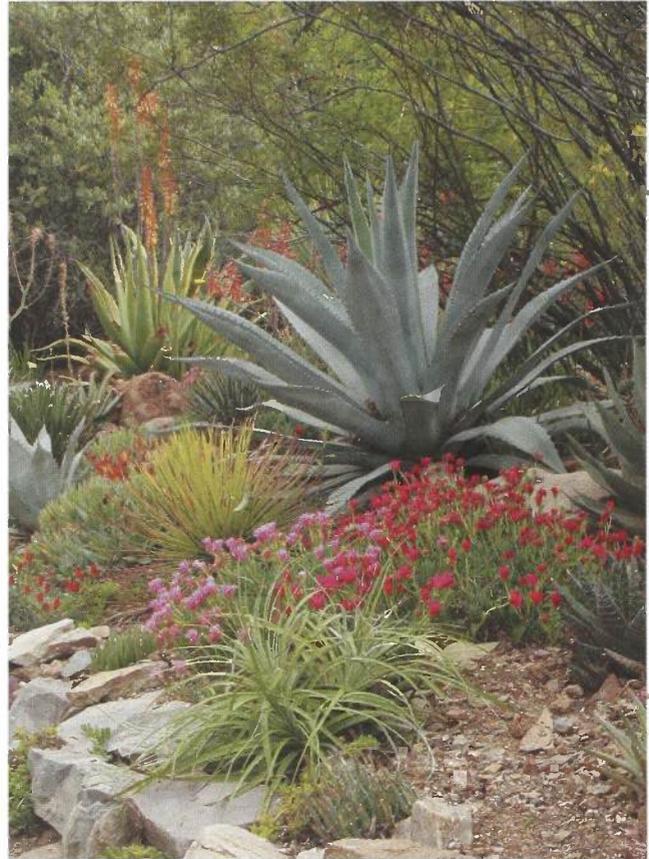
“A few species require open water only for breeding, and may be found anywhere in the park, often far from water. The Wandering Glider and Variegated Meadowhawk are two of these wide-rangers,” said Moulton.

Moulton’s closeup photos of the beautiful blue Springwater Dancer damselfly and a brilliant red skimmer can be seen on the Arboretum website, which is well worth a visit to read more about this guided tour and others.

### Edible Plants

Native jojoba seeds can be easily found on a hike along desert trails in late summer and early fall. Did you know these peanut-sized dark brown seeds can be roasted to taste a little like hazelnuts... or that oils from abundant creosote plants have a wide variety of antiseptic and healing properties? On the second Saturday and fourth Sunday each month visitors learn how plants of the Sonoran Desert have been used to heal, nourish and clothe native people for millennia. Jojoba (*Simmondsia chinensis*) is also known by the nicknames “goat nut,” deer nut and coffeebush – the latter from its reputation as an acceptable coffee substitute when mature seeds are roasted. The protein-packed seeds are edible, and waxy oil pressed from them is widely used in shampoos and skin lotions. Tea brewed from jojoba leaves can sooth inflamed mucous membranes.

Arizona ethnobotanist David Morris is one of the volunteer tourguides for this guided walk, and studies the ways Indian tribes and indigenous people use plants. Morris has sampled jojoba, and says the abundant nuts taste better with a light roasting – taking on a flavor akin to hazelnut. Asked to name a favorite desert plant species he cites the agave. “Fleshy leaves of the agave were the source of fiber (sisal) for the early desert natives. The fibers would be used for cordage, rope, baskets, mats and sandals. The heart of the agave was roasted and eaten and the leaf tea is thought to relieve arthritic pain,” said Morris.



Alongside the agaves, in the springtime the succulent garden bursts with color as the ice plants and aloes come into full bloom. (Jason Sampson 2002-2006. All rights reserved.)

“And here’s another: Native Americans in the desert refer to the mesquite tree as the “tree of life”. The pods can be ground up and they provided the main source of flour until the introduction of European wheat, rye and barley. The bark of the mesquite can be boiled to produce a germ-killing wash for minor cuts and scrapes. The Piipash (Maricopa) obtain a black paint from mesquite bark that is used to add designs to their traditional pottery.”

Tourguide duties are split between Mr. Morris and Apache Junction author Jean Groen, who wrote “Foods of the Superstitions” with Don Wells. “My favorite plant is the prickly pear,” said Groen, “There are so many things you can make to eat and drink from parts of the plant. My absolute favorite food to make from the pads, *nopalitos* in Spanish, is a wonderful soup. *Nopalitos* are good in salad, salsa, scrambled eggs, and pickle relish using the *nopalitos* in place of cucumbers. Prickly pear fruits, also called “*tunas*,” are wonderful when made into brandied tunas. For beverages there are Prickly Pear blush, prickly pear tea, cactus shakes, and my all time favorite: prickly pear margaritas.” Sometimes following the guided tour Ms. Groen serves her guests a non-alcoholic version of this drink made from her award-winning recipe.

“My second favorite plant is the mesquite tree. Almost every part of the tree can be put to good use. The Indians used it for medicine, food, tea, implements, weapons, twine, and paint. I use the pods to make jelly and to make flour which can be substituted in place of regular flour. You wouldn’t want to substitute more than a half-cup in each cup of regular flour. The mesquite flour will make the product sweet so you might want to decrease the sugar called for. Also, the mesquite flour has much less gluten than regular flour so you might want to make note of this when making yeast bread.”

Tucson painter Martha Burgess attended David Morris’ tour one hot Summer day in 2005, and was pleased at the level of detailed explanation of Sonoran plants and their uses. “Ethnobotany is my thing, and your *Curandero* trail is one of my favorite places – it’s where the plants bring many cultures together – that’s a switch! It brings our local Tohono O’odham, Akimel O’odham and Maricopa together with African, Anglo, and Native people from farther afield together, joined for the mutual purposes of healing, curing, or culinary excitement using desert flora.”

“On that trail I always get my eyes opened to new talents in ‘old friends,’ in the plants which I’ve long loved for their beauty, aroma or perseverance. Invariably, delving into the detailed signage, or hearing of new uses by personable and humorous Choctaw interpreter David Morris, I came away enriched and ready to grow them, honor them, try them out, and even experiment with their attributes.”

As with most other weekend guided tours the edible/medicinal plants walk is included with regular park admission. Boyce Thompson Arboretum is affiliated with the UA’s College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, in addition to being an Arizona State Park.

The Arboretum was founded in 1925, and over the years has grown to become a botany research affiliate of the University of Arizona’s College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. In 1976 the Arboretum was added to the Arizona State Parks

system as well. Col. William Boyce Thompson was a turn-of-the-century investor and copper baron who earned his fortune developing huge mines in Superior and also the communities of Globe and Miami another 40 minutes drive east via highway 60. Thompson founded his namesake arboretum with a mission “to instill in people an appreciation of arid land plants through fostering education, recreation, research and conservation.”

Visitors should usually allow at least two hours to walk the 1.5 mile main loop hiking trail which passes through the cactus garden, alongside Ayer Lake and amidst massive volcanic rock formations before descending to a shady, tree-lined path that follows a flat course parallel to Queen Creek. About half of this trail network is wheelchair-accessible. The High Trail is not, and this half-mile path offers a more challenging hike for those visitors who would enjoy climbing up above treetop level for a truly “birds-eye” view of Arboretum collections and the Queen Creek riparian corridor. More than 50 acres of developed gardens invite visitors to learn about desert landscaping, bird-watching and Sonoran ecology.

Start your tour at the Visitor Center, which houses a bookstore and, of course, a wide variety of cacti, succulents and leafy plants that are all available for purchase. The historic Smith building a short walk down the main trail contains botanical exhibits and displays, and two display greenhouses feature cacti and other succulents.

Spring and early summer are the time for wildflowers and lush cactus blossoms; most native Sonoran Desert flowers have faded by autumn, when visitors look forward to cooler temperatures and the chance to see the annual show of magnificent fall foliage. Indeed the grove of ornamental Chinese Pistachio trees across from the Herb Garden at the Arboretum reaches peak color towards the final weeks of November with a range of golden, red and pumpkin-orange leaves.

The Arboretum has a thriving volunteer program; both seasonal and year-round residents are encouraged to pitch in by assisting horticulturists and groundskeepers with weeding, pruning and a variety of other jobs on the grounds. Prefer not to get your hands dirty? Volunteers also help with special events, work in the office and also help the bookstore staff. For details about the volunteer program visit the Arboretum website or ask for an application when you visit. Boyce Thompson Arboretum is located at Highway 60 milepost 223 near the town of Superior, a drive 30 minutes due east of Apache Junction on Highway 60, or 90 minutes drive north of Tucson via Oracle Road north to highway 79, north to highway 60 East.

Make a day of your trip – visit the town of Superior’s own unabashed tourist trap “The World’s Smallest Museum” just another mile past the Arboretum. You can get a tasty green

chile burger at the adjacent Buckboard City Grill, or innovative lunch specials at the Cafe Piedra Roja a few minutes away in downtown Superior. In addition, the stretch of road between the towns of Superior and Miami was designated a scenic byway and is well worth a drive to see the dramatic rock formations of Queen Creek Canyon, the Oak Flats campground and Devil's Canyon all along highway 60 (for those with internet access take a virtual tour by visiting [arizonascenicroads.com](http://arizonascenicroads.com))

The Arboretum is near highway 60 milepost #223 as you approach the historic copper mining town of Superior, about 30 minutes' drive due east of Apache Junction or 90 minutes north of Tucson via Oracle Road, north to Highway 79, north past the town of Florence, then another 12 miles east on highway 60.

#### **Boyce Thompson Arboretum at a Glance**

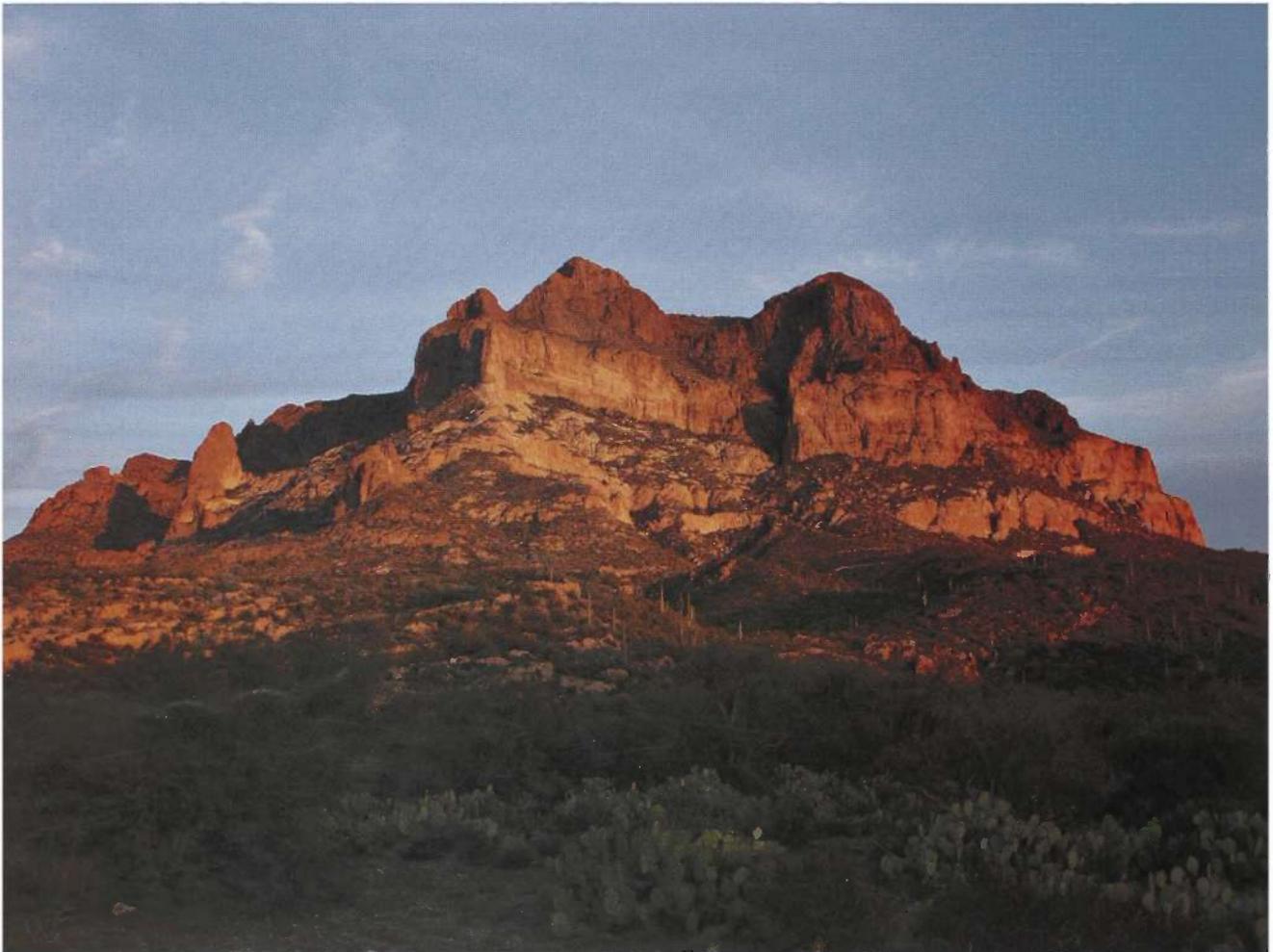
Hours: 6:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. May-through-August; 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. September-through-April

Daily Park Admission: \$7.50 for adults, \$3 ages 5-12

Annual Membership: \$35 dual / \$50 for a family

Recorded info 520.689.2811

website <http://ag.arizona.edu/bta>



Picketpost Mountain, which was once a signalling station for troops based in the area, rises above Boyce Thompson Arboretum. (Jason Sampson 2002-2006. All rights reserved.)