Zen and the Art of Plant Communities

Mark Siegwarth
Boyce Thompson Arboretum
37615 E Highway 60
Superior, AZ
msiegwar@cals.arizona.edu

Creating naturalistic landscapes representative of the world’s deserts has become one of the defining features of Boyce Thompson Arboretum. There are many principles of horticulture and landscape design: leveraging the location, color palette, effects of the sun and shading, soil, temperature range and desired water use. As you can see from the following pictures, the Arboretum uses all these principles but adds a few more. It is these additional principles that I believe differentiate a good garden from a great one, much the same way one distinguishes a good painting from a great painting. Designing a landscape is an act of creation and one that requires time and the elements to be partners in its creation. A truly great garden touches the heart and soul as well as the mind.

The first principle is the establishment of a plant community. It can be a small area, such as this example of a mesquite tree sheltering an *Echinopsis terscheckii* and *Stetsonia coryne* (p.4) or a large area, such as the Australian shrubby woodland (p.5). What is important is that the plants located together are the same ones that would occur together naturally, preferably in a similar distribution and landscape in an attempt to show their interdependence and interaction.

The second principle is that each garden or exhibit tells a story. This may seem fairly simple in that just explaining the exhibit is in itself an educational story. That sets the bar rather low for defining a great garden. Having an *Echinopsis pasacana* near the *Echinopsis terscheckii* (cover) allows one to develop the story about this cousin of the *E. terscheckii* which has spines adapted to the higher altitude where it grows. The groupings of *Echinocereus triglochidiatus* var. *arizonicus* allows a discussion of rare, threatened and endangered plants and conservation efforts aimed at preserving them. Another question is why growing a vast amount of this species at the Arboretum’s 2,400 feet altitude is akin to introducing an invasive species, since its range is generally above 4,000 feet in altitude.

Leveraging location (M. Siegwarth)

Color palette (M. Siegwarth)
Desert Plants

"Mr. Big" *Eucalyptus camaldulensis* (M. Siegwarth)

*Echinopsis terscheckii* and *Stetsonia coryne* (M. Siegwarth)

*Echinocereus triglochidiatus* var. *arizonicus* (M. Siegwarth)

*Eucalyptus campaspe* (M. Siegwarth)

*Eucalyptus salubris* and Bill Benson (M. Siegwarth)
Not all stories need to be so scholarly. Visitors are just as impressed with the fact that Mr. Big, *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*, was planted in 1926 as they are with its size. A step was constructed so visitors could hug our *Eucalyptus campaspe* and their love of its smooth bark spawned the planting of *Eucalyptus salubris* in the Australian area, another story of man and plant interaction. The fact that I personally know Bill Benson, the man who made the step and who planted most of the *Pistacia chinensis* on the grounds usually interests visitors even more.

The next principle I would like to discuss is allowing the visitor to be surrounded by the area. In larger areas, such as the Australian Shrubby Woodland Area or the Riparian Area, this is fairly easy to do. Much like walking into a painting, the visitor is transported to another place. However, a large area is not required to achieve this effect as demonstrated by the *Brachychiton rupestris* Area. The book “Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance” by Robert M. Pirsig explains the importance of becoming an integral part of the landscape as he compares people in automobiles looking at the landscape to watching television, versus the motocyclist being in the landscape. The more we keep people outside these plant communities looking in, the more we will become museums or even worse, PowerPoint presentations, something else to see and not be part of.

This idea of Zen can be expanded upon from “Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind” by Shunryu Suzuki. Many people come to the Arboretum for peace, solitude and reflection. In the Introduction by Richard Baker, “Zen Mind is one of those enigmatic phrases used by Zen Teachers to make you notice yourself, to go beyond words and wonder what your own mind and being are.” He goes on to say “The mind of the beginner is empty, free of the habits of the expert, ready to accept, to doubt and open to all the possibilities. It is the kind of mind which can see things as they are.” The Arboretum is in constant change, a flower can be closed in the morning and open a few hours later. One can almost watch the bell curve as the hues intensify and then diminish over days or weeks. As one visits the Arboretum each time with a beginner’s mind, a new world opens up and frequently a deep emotional connection or friendship as well. When I give tours, I no longer take people to see certain things. I merely take them out into the Arboretum and with an open mind look to see what is new; I am never disappointed. My visitors are always astounded when I mention that this iris was not blooming yesterday and this is the first bloom of the season.

Another example is when I first take people to the *Brachychiton rupestris* Area, they have no idea what to expect. As I show them the eight trees we have planted, I see them consider that this is what Australia must look like. When I point to the 30+ year old *B. rupestris* behind a bush, I begin to see their minds work again.
They imagine what the place will look like 30 years from now and that maybe they need to change what they first thought Australia might look like. Then I see the questions begin to form. Will they be alive then, will their grandchildren visit, if they bring their grandchildren to visit a month from now will it be different, will the smells or textures change, will annuals sprout to cover the ground with the color of purple or green? They have entered an area with a beginner’s mind and have become part of the landscape. This is how we instill an appreciation of plants in people; this is our mission and what makes the Arboretum such a special place.

The final principle I would like to discuss is the idea of layering. Too often people go to places where everything they need to know is laid out for them and when they leave, they can say with confidence, I have done that. The plant communities that have been created at the Arboretum have many different levels of understanding. Much like a great novel or painting, if you care to, you can go deeper and deeper into their meaning. The Arboretum is like that, pretty on the surface, but so much more beautiful if you take the time to understand it fully. As a final note, I am still learning more about its beauty every day and do not foresee an end to my journey, nor do I hope there is one.