

Native Plants of the Tucson Area




2026 Pima County Master Gardeners Home Garden Tour




Celebrating Native Plants



Tucson's Sonoran Desert is home to a remarkable diversity of native plants uniquely adapted to our hot, dry climate. The plants in this guide are native to the Tucson region and can be found throughout the 2026 Pima County Master Gardeners Home Garden Tour. As you explore, notice how these plants support hummingbirds, bees, butterflies, and other wildlife — thriving with minimal water while creating beautiful, resilient landscapes that reflect the natural character of our desert.




Pollinator Key:  Bird  Butterfly  Bee  Hummingbird  Bat




Trees



Celtis reticulata
Netleaf Hackberry
   • Berries feed dozens of bird species; leaves host snout butterfly caterpillars.



Chilopsis linearis
Desert Willow
   • Orchid-like blooms make it the showiest flowering tree in the Sonoran Desert.




Lysiloma watsonii
Feather Bush
  • Feathery, fern-like canopy fixes nitrogen, enriching desert soils naturally.




Neltuma velutina
Velvet Mesquite
   • Deep roots reach water 150 ft underground; pods were a staple food for desert peoples.

Olneya tesota
Desert Ironwood
   • Hardest wood in North America; nurse tree for 500+ plant and animal species.

Parkinsonia florida
Blue Palo Verde
  • Arizona's state tree — photosynthesizes through green bark, not leaves.



Parkinsonia microphylla
Foothill / Yellow Palo Verde
  • Protein-rich seeds ground into flour by desert peoples; nesting refuge for cactus wrens.



Rhus virens var. choriophylla
Evergreen Sumac
   • One of the few truly evergreen Sonoran Desert shrubs; winter berries feed dozens of bird species.


Vachellia constricta
Whitethorn
Acacia
  



• Dense thorny thickets provide critical bird nesting cover in desert washes.



Shrubs

Abutilon palmeri
Palmer's Indian Mallow
  • Blooms nearly year-round — rare continuous nectar during lean winter months.

Aloysia gratissima
Bee Brush
  • Vanilla-like fragrance; considered one of the top honey plants in the Sonoran Desert.

Ambrosia deltoidea
Triangle-leaf Bursage
 • Most abundant bajada shrub; critical nurse plant for saguaro seedlings.

Anisacanthus quadrifidus var. wrightii
Wright's Desert Honeysuckle
  • Blooms summer through fall frost — prime fuel for migrating hummingbirds.

Anisacanthus thurberi
Thurber's Desert Honeysuckle
  • Red-orange flowers timed perfectly to fuel southbound hummingbirds.

Baccharis sarothroides
Desert Broom
 

- Male and female flowers on separate plants; fluffy white seed heads iconic in autumn washes.

Calliandra eriophylla
Pink Fairy Duster
  

- Flowers made entirely of pink stamens — no petals at all.

Dalea pulchra
Bush Dalea
 

- Deep purple spikes and silver foliage — one of the most ornamental native shrubs.

Duranta erecta
Skyflower
  

- Displays purple flowers and golden berries simultaneously on the same plant.

Encelia farinosa
Brittlebush
 

- Blankets hillsides solid gold each spring; stems burned as incense by the Seri people.

Ericameria laricifolia
Turpentine Bush
 




- Late-season yellow flowers are vital for migrating butterflies and bees before winter.

Erythrina flabelliformis
Coral Bean
  



- Scarlet flowers emerge from bare branches before leaves — a striking spring spectacle.

Gossypium thurberi
Desert Cotton
 

- Wild ancestor of cultivated cotton; flowers shift from white to deep pink with age.

Hyptis emoryi
Desert Lavender
  


- Powerful sage-like fragrance; top native plant for attracting Sonoran Desert bees.

Isocoma acradenia
Alkali Goldenbush
 


- Thrives in alkaline, saline soils where most plants cannot survive.

Justicia californica
Chuparosa
 


- Chuparosa means hummingbird — hummingbirds are its sole effective pollinator.

Krameria bicolor
White Ratany


- Root hemiparasite; tricks oil-collecting bees into pollination with no nectar reward.

Krameria erecta
Littleleaf Ratany




- Red-purple flowers mimic oil-producing plants to deceive specialist Centris bees.

Larrea tridentata
Creosote Bush



- A creosote clone in the Mojave is ~11,700 years old — one of Earth's oldest organisms.

Lycium brevipes
Baja Desert Thorn
  

- Among the earliest winter bloomers — critical nectar bridge for returning hummingbirds.

Mimosa dysocarpa
Velvet Pod
Mimosa
 



- Recurved thorns snag passersby (wait-a-minute), but bees love its pink puffballs.

Plumbago scandens
Summer Snow
Plumbago
 



- Sticky seeds hitchhike on fur and feathers; long floral tube rewards butterfly pollinators.

Psilostrophe cooperi
Whitestem
Paperflower
 

- Dried ray flowers persist for months, giving the plant a perpetually blooming appearance.

Senna covessii
Desert Senna
 

- Essential larval host for cloudless sulphur and sleepy orange butterflies.

Senna lindheimeriana
Velvet Leaf Senna
 

- Dense silver hairs on leaves reflect sunlight and dramatically cut water loss.

Simmondsia chinensis
Jojoba
 

- Seeds produce a unique liquid wax now worth hundreds of millions in the cosmetic industry.

Tecoma stans

Yellow Bells



- Produces yellow trumpet flowers nearly continuously from late spring through hard frost.

Trixis californica

Trixis



- Reliable butterfly nectar source in shaded understory where few other flowers grow.

Vauquelinia californica

Arizona

Rosewood



- The only rose-family tree native to the Sonoran Desert.

Cacti & Succulents

Agave murpheyi

Hohokam Agave



- A Hohokam cultigen rarely found wild — living link to ancient desert agriculture.

Agave parryi

Artichoke Agave



- Bloom stalk reaches 15 ft, then the plant dies — a dramatic monocarpic finale.

Carnegiea gigantea

Saguaro



- Lives 200 years; produces 40 million seeds in a lifetime. Arizona's iconic state flower.

Cylindropuntia acanthocarpa

Buckhorn Cholla



- Barbed joints hitchhike on animals — dispersal without seeds.

Cylindropuntia arbuscula

Arizona Pencil Cactus



- Slimmest cholla; pencil-thin stems thrive in the hottest, lowest desert flats.

Cylindropuntia bigelovii

Teddy Bear Cholla



- Treacherous spines grab on contact, yet cactus wrens nest safely inside.

Cylindropuntia fulgida

Chain-fruit Cholla



- Reproduces almost entirely through detached joints — rarely needs seeds.

Cylindropuntia leptocaulis

Desert Christmas Cactus



- Bright red berries ripen at Christmas and persist for months, feeding desert birds.

Cylindropuntia versicolor

Staghorn Cholla



- Flowers range yellow to bronze, purple, and red — even on the same plant.

Cylindropuntia x tetracantha

Tucson Cholla



- Naturally occurring hybrid illustrating ongoing wild cactus evolution.

Dasyliirion wheeleri

Desert Spoon



- Dried stalks hollowed for sotol, a ceremonial drink; leaves woven into baskets.

Echinocereus fasciculatus

Pinkflower Hedgehog



- Vivid magenta flowers are among the first desert blooms, fueling early-season bees.

Ferocactus wislizeni

Fishhook Barrel Cactus



- The compass cactus — leans south; fruits feed birds and javelinas all winter.

Fouquieria splendens

Ocotillo



- Can leaf out and drop leaves up to five times per year in response to rainfall.

Mammillaria grahamii

Graham's Nipple Cactus



- Tiny enough to hide under a shrub; vivid pink flower crown and red berries.

Opuntia engelmannii

Engelmann's Prickly Pear




- Sweet red tunas (fruits) have been a desert food staple for thousands of years.

Opuntia santa-rita
Santa Rita Prickly Pear
  

- Pads turn vivid purple under cold or drought stress — most colorful Sonoran cactus.


Peniocereus greggii
Night-blooming Cereus / Queen of the Night
  

- Blooms one night per year — all regional plants bloom simultaneously.

Yucca baccata
Banana Yucca
 

- Pollinated exclusively by Yucca moth — neither species can reproduce without the other.


Grasses

Muhlenbergia dumosa
Bamboo Muhly



- Bamboo-like stems create a tropical accent rare among native desert grasses.

Muhlenbergia rigens
Deer Grass


- The premier basket-weaving grass of Tohono O'odham and other desert peoples.

Schizachyrium scoparium
Little Bluestem


- Turns brilliant orange, red, and copper in fall — rare autumn color in the desert.

Sporobolus wrightii
Big Sacaton Grass


- Largest native desert grass; massive clumps provide critical grassland bird habitat.

Wildflowers & Vines

Aquilegia chrysantha
Golden Columbine
  

- Long nectar spurs co-evolved with hummingbird bill length — textbook pollinator pairing.

Asclepias angustifolia
Arizona Milkweed
 


- One of the few Tucson-area milkweeds; essential larval food for monarch butterflies.

Asclepias linaria
Pine-needle Milkweed
 


- Needle-like leaves minimize water loss while supporting year-round monarch populations.

Asclepias subulata
Desert Milkweed
  

- Photosynthesizes through stems — blooms in extreme drought when other milkweeds die.

Baileya multiradiata
Desert Marigold
 


- One of the longest-blooming desert wildflowers — gold for months with no water.

Cardiospermum corindum
Balloon Vine
 

- Papery inflated seed pods; shelters hairstreak butterfly caterpillars in its foliage.

Conoclinium greggii
Gregg's Mistflower
 

- Most reliable fall plant for attracting migrating queen and monarch butterflies.

Dicliptera resupinata
Arizona Foldwing
 

- Rare shade-tolerant wildflower; thrives under mesquite and palo verde canopies.

Epilobium canum* subsp. *latifolium
Hummingbird Trumpet
 

- Scarlet blooms from summer through frost — arguably the best hummingbird plant.

Erigeron divergens
Spreading Fleabane
 


- Among the first wildflowers to colonize disturbed desert soils.

Eschscholzia californica* subsp. *mexicana
California Poppy


- Carpets bajadas in gold after winter rains — a celebrated Sonoran wildflower spectacle.

Kallstroemia grandiflora
Arizona Poppy
 

- Glowing orange monsoon wildflower that carpets roadsides after summer rains.

Maurandella antirrhiniflora
Snapdragon Vine
 

- Delicate twining vine; flower too narrow for most bees — specialist pollinators only.

Melampodium leucanthum
Blackfoot Daisy
 


- White daisies for 10+ months a year with virtually no supplemental water.

Nicotiana obtusifolia
Desert Tobacco
  

- White flowers open at dusk; fragrant evening blooms attract hawk moths and bats.

Oenothera caespitosa
Tufted Evening Primrose
 

- Pure white flowers open at sunset, fade pink by morning — sphinx moth pollinated.

Oenothera primiveris
Desert Evening Primrose
 

- Flowers appear oversized for the tiny plant; pollinated by a specialist native bee.

Oenothera speciosa
Mexican Evening Primrose
 

- Unusual evening primrose — opens in daylight, accessible to a wide range of pollinators.

Penstemon eatonii
Firecracker Penstemon
 

- Fire-engine red tubes nearly exclude bees — near-exclusive hummingbird pollination.

Penstemon parryi
Parry's Penstemon
 

- Arizona's most celebrated penstemon; rose-pink wands sweep rocky slopes in late winter.

Phacelia campanularia
Desert Bluebells


- Among the rare Sonoran Desert natives to produce truly blue flowers.

Ruellia nudiflora
Common Wild Petunia
  



- Explosive seedpods fling seeds feet away; also produces below-ground non-dispersed seeds.

Sphaeralcea ambigua
Globe Mallow


- Vivid orange blooms cause temporary eye irritation — earning the name sore-eye poppy.

Streptanthus carinatus
Lyreleaf Jewelflower
 



- Translucent urn-shaped flowers in burgundy, purple, and green resemble hand-blown glass.

Tetraneuris acaulis
Angelita Daisy
 

- Golden daisy flowers rise on bare stalks directly from a ground-hugging leaf tuft.

Thymophylla pentachaeta
Dogweed
 

- Tiny but prolific; disproportionately important nectar source for small native bees.

Vitis arizonica
Arizona Grape
 

- Fruits eaten by 100+ bird species; creates critical canopy cover over desert streams.

Zinnia acerosa
Desert Zinnia
 

- Wild ancestor of garden zinnias; thrives on pure gravel with no soil amendments.

Plants listed with botanical name (*italics*) followed by common name. Compiled for the Tucson region, Sonoran Desert.