

Albuquerque Chapter Newsletter

Native Plant Society of New Mexico

Volume 2, Number 1

January-March 2010

A Sneak Preview of 2010 Programs and Field Trips

by Jim McGrath



Although our chapter's 2010 Events and Activities Calendar is not completely finalized, we have an excellent variety of high quality presentations and field trips already scheduled. Our monthly meeting presentations range from a photographic tour of world deserts to a timely introduction to the threat posed to our food supply by genetically modified seeds.

We will be offering three presentations this year dealing with New Mexico's natural areas and species: one assesses butterfly landscapes in the Albuquerque area, another addresses Chihuahuan Desert shrubs in the Socorro area, and the third one discusses the biology and folklore associated with poisonous plants. Another planned program concerns a developing controversy over whether private and public landscaping should be dominated by plants (grasses, shrubs, and perennials) or by vegetation-less gravel. And in October, members will have an opportunity to show off their summertime plant photos in our second annual photo forum.

We also have a diverse group of outings lined up for 2010. Last year's popular overnight rare plant field trip has been scheduled again for July—the Snow Lake area in Gila country is the probable destination this time. Other field trips include visits to Woody Minnich's cactus and succulent greenhouse in Edgewood, to the Sandia foothills to look for a butterfly, to the Los Lunas bosque to examine noxious weeds, to the Quebradas area southeast of Socorro to look at desert shrubs and gypsophilous plants, and to the Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area near Belen to view fall wildflowers. Additional wildflower trips may be announced at a later date, since the abundance of spring wildflowers is dependent on suitable precipitation during winter and early spring.

Jim McGrath
Program Chair

Valles Caldera Thistle Patrol

On Saturday, September 26, 17 members and friends of the Albuquerque chapter, NPSNM carpoled to the Valles Caldera where we met Los Alamos NPS member Dorothy Hoard. Dorothy, who conducts tours as a volunteer for the Caldera Preserve, led us on a search for both native and invasive nonnative thistles.

We found a large stand of the invasive perennial Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*). This thistle spreads not only by seed, which blows freely like a dandelion seed, but also by rhizomes. The bull thistle (*Cirsium vulgare*) was also found.

Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*) invading a pasture. Photo: College of St. Benedict.



Dorothy also showed us the botanical key she is preparing for the thistles of the Valles Caldera. It contains wonderful color photos, some showing butterfly pollinators on the flowers. The photos are also accompanied by botanical drawings of the plants, beautifully and accurately drawn by Dorothy. She will let us know when the key is available for purchase.

A very interesting offer was made to us following the field trip. Our chapter was asked if we would like to volunteer to search for and remove invasive thistles growing on the Preserve. If a large invasion of these thistles is found, the Preserve management will remove them. We agreed to do this, and have formed a group we call the Thistle Patrol, which will visit the Preserve one to two times next summer, in early June and possibly again in mid-August.

An email notice will be sent out this spring with the exact date and details. Please contact Virginia Burris, Conservation Chair, if you would like more information: vburrisl@msn.com.

Virginia Burris
Conservation Chair

From Your President: Becoming Informed is Prerequisite to Protecting Native Habitat

by Frances Robertson

Sometimes I long for a smaller, safer Albuquerque (actually, every time I drive down San Mateo), for a world that probably only partially existed, but one I wish I could return to anyway. And it might be nice to return to a world where our native plants weren't threatened by global warming or genetically engineered plants, or to a time when invasives weren't so widespread.

Unfortunately, we can't return to that place or time. But what we *can* do as a chapter of NPSNM is to educate ourselves about the dangers facing the plants we love and try to protect them. It is with that in mind that three talks this year focus on challenges to the health and well-being of our native plants. One talk is on the noxious weeds burgeoning along our ditch banks and valley floors (Don Heinze), another will give us the latest scoop on tamarisk (*Tamarix ramosissima*), and a third one is on the genetically engineered plants and seeds that threaten native flora.

We're not alone in our concern for protecting native habitat. The December Albuquerque Area Extension Master Gardener Newsletter contained an article by Jim Hightower, former Texas Agricultural Secretary on genetically engineered eucalyptus and the way it entered the U.S. Here is how he describes that event:

In May, with little consideration of the devastating consequences for our native environment, USDA cavalierly rubberstamped a proposal by a profiteering corporation named ArborGen [owned by International Paper] to...bring into our country a genetically-engineered, nonnative tree [cellulose-enhanced eucalyptus] that is known to be wildly invasive, explosively flammable, and insatiably thirsty for ground water...[in order to] clone thousands of [them] and plant them in forested regions across seven Southern states, allowing them to grow, flower, produce seeds, and spread into native environments.

ArborGen shipped tissue from Brazilian eucalyptus trees to its New Zealand Laboratories to be genetically altered in order to have more cellulose. [However, since New Zealand] outlaws plantings of genetically-engineered crops [ArborGen had to find] a more corporate-compliant country—ours!...The engineered eucalyptus was waved right into the good ol' USA to be cloned, and it's now awaiting final approval for outdoor release in our land with practically no media coverage or public participation.

This is happening solely because a handful of global speculators hope to profit by making ethanol from cellulose-enhanced eucalyptus—never mind that their self-aggrandizement would put America's native forests in danger of irreversible contamination by these destructive, invasive Frankentrees.

(For more information on this issue, check out www.nogetrees.org which gives a broader picture of the plants that the USDA has approved in the U.S.)

As NPS members, it is important for us to stay abreast of events such as the above, which may have devastating consequences for our native plants. It is your board of directors' job to offer relevant and scholarly talks that keep our members apprised of potential threats to our plant population.

Luckily, we are not alone in our concern. We live in an area where botanists are vibrant and active and willing to share their knowledge with botanically minded organizations such as ours, so that all of us can make the best choices for our natives. We are also grateful to the efforts of other local organizations that are making a difference in education and conservation efforts.

Frances Robertson
Chapter President



Genetically engineered, herbicide-resistant eucalyptus trees are causing contamination of forests and food crops, reduced forest and wildlife biodiversity, use of broad-spectrum herbicides resulting in increased insect resistance and toxicity to wildlife, and depletion of soil and groundwater. The USDA is expected to rule this year on allowing commercial GE eucalyptus tree plantations in the U.S. Photo: Courtesy of Edward L. Barnard, Florida Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services, Bugwood, org.

Musings of a Habitat Gardener: A Change in Attitude, Perception, and Purpose

by Virginia Burris

The first two “Musings” that appeared in our chapter newsletter were philosophical in nature. Spring will soon be here and you may be thinking, “Why did you waste my time with philosophy when what I wanted was advice on how to start my own habitat garden?” I realize I wanted to open your eyes to the natural world and have you savor the richness that makes up the earth and the beauty of its complexity.

Habitat gardening requires changing our images and perception of what is beautiful and desirable in a garden. Traditional garden magazines follow guidelines set by a *Better Homes and Gardens* standard, which is epitomized by the perfectly manicured garden surrounded by a white picket fence. In such a garden, one does not allow butterfly larvae to chew holes in leaves (the food source larvae need in order to grow), dead branches (which are preferred perches for birds), or spent flower heads (which furnish seeds for winter bird food).

Can we accept holes in leaves as desirable if we educate ourselves to see the holes as a stage in a butterfly’s life cycle? If we know that the dried and tan blades of grass at the base of native bunch grasses provide two benefits to lizards—a source of insects and a place to escape from predators—can we let the grasses be?



The fallen and decaying leaves of bunch grasses provide a great place for lizards to hide from predators and to find tasty bugs.



Dead tree branches provide preferred perching spots for birds, providing we resist the urge to prune them and instead become accustomed to the “natural” garden look.

It takes time to accept the unfamiliar look of vegetation that appears damaged or past its prime, but gradually one’s idea of what is beautiful starts to change. A hole in a leaf means a butterfly larva will serve as food for a bird or, if the larva is lucky, it will survive to become a butterfly. (Only 1 in 100 butterfly larvae survives to become a butterfly!) A fading flower head turning plump with seeds will soon attract a variety of hungry birds, including perky and beautiful yellow and black goldfinches.

When I moved to New Mexico 20 years ago, I knew nothing about habitat gardening. In fact, I did not even know I was headed in that direction. I did know I wanted to landscape with native plants, even if that meant my landscape would be brown most of the year. After all, I had been told that deserts are brown. Not only was I starting to change my style of landscaping, but I was changing my perception of beauty and the purpose of gardening.

I started observing what was around me in the Sandias, along the Rio Grande, and on the UNM campus where quite a few native plants are mixed into the landscape. To my surprise, many of the native plants were green—not brown. Is cactus brown? No! Picture the pads of prickly pear cactus which are green all year. Had I not seen the numerous green and blue-green plants that were growing in that brown desert soil? Did my assumption that all desert plants are brown come from the bare brown desert soil showing between the desert plants? Assumptions play tricks on us, and we need to change them or they hold us back.

The biggest threat to wildlife today is loss of habitat. Bee populations of both native and European honey bees are plummeting. Bat populations are endangered. When



Prickly pear cactus (*Opuntia* spp.) is one of many New Mexico natives that retains its green color year-round. Photo: Declan McCullagh.

we learn that one-third of our food production relies on pollinators, the importance of these losses is stunning. If we take action, these losses can be slowed down by creating “habitat gardens.”

We can make our gardens friendlier to pollinators and other wildlife by changing the way we plan our gardens, what we plant, and the style of maintenance we use. Think of how much land is covered by cities due to pavement and buildings. If all of us who live in cities and towns would add habitat suitable for wildlife to our gardens, it could have a substantial, beneficial impact on our environment. Let’s do it, one yard at a time.

Those of you who are motivated to create a habitat garden will appreciate knowing that you can start small and get quick results. I didn’t convert my garden overnight, but started by focusing on just a small section and that worked very well. Pick a part of your yard that receives at least eight hours of sun a day, as native plants thrive on sun. A few well-chosen plants can get you off to a fine start. Here are some suggestions of plants to use, which include a mix of natives and non-natives.

Plant a butterfly bush, standard size (*Buddleia davidii*) or dwarf (*Buddleia davidii* var. *nanhoensis*) to attract butterflies, and common green fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*), which is the swallowtail butterfly host plant for eggs and larvae. Include the native annual sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*) because it will attract bees and butterflies to its flowers and birds to its numerous mature seed heads. As a bonus, enough seeds will drop to the ground and germinate so you will end up with a new crop of sunflowers next spring. Add several Palmers penstemon (*Penstemon palmeri*) to attract bumblebees and other bees in the spring. Also consider planting the bright yellow paperflower (*Psilotrophe tagetina*) which blooms from spring through late fall. This combination will provide food (leaves, seeds, and nectar) throughout

the growing season for insects and birds. These plants will return the following spring since they are either perennials or self-seeding annuals.

Virginia Burris is a past president and the current Conservation Chair of the Albuquerque Chapter, NPSNM, and consults on habitat landscape design.



Top: A leafcutter bee, and leaves showing the distinctive semicircular and oval cuts it makes. Left: Larva of swallowtail butterfly on host plant. Both adult insects are important pollinators.



Above: Native annual sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*) provides food for bees, butterflies, and birds. Left: Palmer's penstemon (*Penstemon palmeri*) is frequented by bumblebees. Both photos by Carolyn Dodson.

Landscaping With Natives: Colorscaping Trilogy

by George Miller

Of the many interests encompassed by native plant lovers, landscaping is close to my heart. Why not let our yards highlight some of the magnificent species that thrive in the desert and foothills around Albuquerque? Each quarter, this column will feature three plants with significant ornamental qualities and seasonal landscaping activities to fine tune your yard into a neighborhood showcase.

The dormant season is a good time to give your shrubs a trim. After a season of growth, many perennials need minor pruning to keep a dense shape, especially if overwatering has stimulated rambunctious growth. Don't try to square off native shrubs; let them develop naturally. A snip here and there is all that is necessary to prepare for the next growing season.

On our chapter's Field Forum trips in the Petroglyph National Monument this year, we saw a number of desert shrubs that make attractive additions to any xeriscape planting. Yet all too often we overlook these hardy natives in favor of more verdant-looking nursery selections of low-water exotic species. Here are three shrubs that, given a little hometown love, will colorscape your yard with spring, summer, and fall color.

Chamisa (*Ericameria nauseosa*)



From late summer to early fall, profuse yellow flowers turn chamisa into a butterball of color. The narrow, blue-green leaves provide year-round accent. Choose a well-draining location with full to partial shade and this erect three-to-five-foot shrub makes a handsome stand-alone or mixed planting with the following two selections.



Apache Plume (*Fallugia paradoxa*)



Because it can grow from a gallon pot into a three-foot-tall flowering specimen in only one growing season, Apache plume jump-starts any landscape. Tiny evergreen leaves add a little texture, but the white flowers and flashy feathery seed plumes decorate the bush from spring through October. With full sun, it develops into a three-to-eight-foot specimen, or mass plant for hedge cover. A winter trim keeps the foliage dense.

Feather Dalea (*Dalea formosa*)



Photo on left: Bob Sivinski.

In the spring and early summer, purple spikes of flowers surrounded by feathery plumes transform feather dalea into a dazzling addition to any Albuquerque yard. The naturally zigzag branching, dense shape, and petite leaflets complement a landscape island or colorscape design with early spring accent. Plant in full sun, and prune lightly in the winter to encourage compact growth. Too much water or fertilizer produces weak growth. You'll have to search native plant nurseries for this beauty, but it's worth the effort.

George Miller writes about nature travel destinations for regional and national magazines. He wrote *Landscaping With Native Plants of the Southwest* and two companion books on Texas and Southern California landscaping, and *A Field Guide to Wildflowers, Trees, and Shrubs of Texas*. [All photos by the author except where noted.]

The Dilemma of Landscaping With Native Plants

by Beth Herschman

In my capacity as a landscape designer, I have observed that most native plant lovers in Bernalillo County do *not* have strictly native plant gardens. Why is that? We know it is certainly more useful to have natives than adaptives (nonnative plants that have adapted to our climate and thrive in it), for all the reasons that we, who are advocates of native plants, usually espouse. They require less water, fertilizer, and pruning, little or no pesticide, attract beneficial insects and birds, and play a part in restoring the local ecology.

Yet when I provide landscape plans to my clients, most contain a fair number of adaptive plants. I've come up with three main reasons why this is so, and all are related to aesthetics.

The number one reason is a distinct lack of native evergreen trees and shrubs. This is always the backbone of any good landscape. Hence you see the ubiquitous Chinese junipers (*Juniperus chinensis*) everywhere, along with a variety of cypresses. It is very difficult to find native shrubs and trees that are attractive through the winter in the Albuquerque area.

Our native evergreen trees are problematic. They all occur naturally at a higher altitude than Albuquerque's, and suffer from the higher heat and lower snow accumulations in our area. The pinons and ponderosas have been decimated everywhere in New Mexico by the pine bark beetle and pine tip moth, which is why I often



Mix of natives and adaptives along this path keep it interesting all year long. Some of the plants pictured include (on the left) two junipers flanking a sugar bush, and (on the right) blue spirea, a stand of Maximilian sunflowers, a blooming crape myrtle, and a large desert willow. All photos by the author.



Combining adaptive nonnatives with New Mexico native plants adds greater aesthetic interest to gardens. The backbone of this garden is a mix of conifers, cacti, and succulents, all of which are evergreen.

recommend the evergreen Austrian pine (*Pinus nigra*), which seems more resistant to insect infestations. The one surprisingly successful high altitude conifer in our yard is the Colorado blue spruce (*Picea pungens*). While I've often seen those suffering from heat and lack of water, ours is somewhat shaded by the house in the afternoon, which likely keeps the soil cooler and the tree healthier.

The second reason people use adaptive plants is because natives—having truly adapted to our climate—do not leaf out until very late. If your yard is comprised primarily of native plants, it will tend to look yellow-gray and appear full of bare sticks until May. This early spring period is when evergreens, bulbs, and flowering trees bring the most joy. After years of looking at gray from the bedroom window of my house, I finally gave in and ordered 500 bulbs and planted them where they would be seen when I woke up during February, March, and April. They make my heart sing!

Other early spring bloomers in our yard are the apricot, plum, and crabapple, and several apple trees

which are 25 years old. The crabapple provides fruit for the birds in February when there is nothing else around for them to eat. But just as exciting is the early blooming hedgehog cactus (*Echinocereus sp.*). I also have a green chamisa (*Ericameria nauseosa*) that leafs out early, blooms in June, and is a welcome sight amongst the gray sticks. Those who get excited over winterfat (*Krascheninnikovia lanata*) are a puzzle to me. Yes, it has fuzzy tops in the winter—but it's gray!

The third reason people use nonnatives in their gardens is due to their size, shape, texture, and/or color. Many of our native shrubs are undramatic, and contain grayish foliage with fine texture and little or no bloom. They are often best used as an accent to, or accented by, a larger-leafed green, flowering plant.

While I've used quite a bit of turpentine bush, cacti, and agaves—which I love—in my landscape plans, I have to admit that I get a real thrill out of the two giant rosemary plants (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) in my backyard which bloom all winter. Their deep green is very satisfying, and I've simply never found a native that can replace this plant. I've planted santolina next to it, but have finally found a reasonable substitute for it—I'm planning to pull out all the santolina and replace it with mariola (*Parthenium incanum*). Also in this same area are several catmint (*Nepeta* 'Six Hills Giant') which I love. While this is not evergreen, it has the advantage of being an early plant, and it will bloom twice in a season if it is given a haircut after its first bloom begins to fade. The bees are very busy around both the catmint and the rosemary.

The only other evergreen species that seems to work here is mahonia. Our native species consists of a groundcover, creeping mahonia (*Berberis repens*) and the truly wicked red barberry or algerita (*Mahonia haematocarpa* and *M. fremontii*). We have each of these algeritas in our yard. I placed them in an area where I try never to go—these plants have leaves that are sharper and meaner than cacti. Another standby is autumn sage (*Salvia greggii*)—now available in many colors of bloom, red or cherry being the most common. While it flowers profusely in full or partial sun, it also performs well when planted in areas that receive morning sun but afternoon shade. Most winters it retains some leaves, but the last two winters, being buried in snow, the ones in my yard died back to the ground. They have returned reliably in full force both springs.

I managed to pick up a sugar bush (*Rhus ovata*), which has broad, waxy leaves, at one of our native plant sales a few years ago. It is also evergreen and has been able to survive in a spot in my yard where nothing else has. It seems right at home with no water and a sandy

soil. I'd like to see more of these on the market. While it is native to California and Arizona, it's a great adaptive plant in New Mexico. I have several other native shrubs in my yard, but the one I enjoy most is Apache plume (*Fallugia paradoxa*). The long, splendid display of white flowers and feathery pinkish plumes (seeds) more than makes up for its rather gray-stick look. Another fine textured native silvery shrub is sand sage (*Artemesia filifolia*), which I like to put near a green conifer or a large-leafed plant like silverberry (*Eleagnus pungens*) for the contrast.

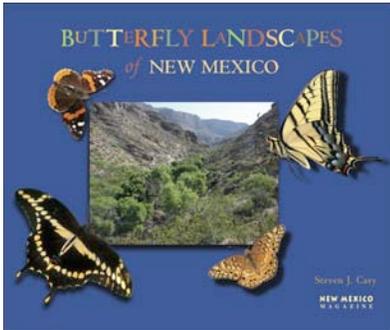


Garden "laboratory" of natives (from front to back): Texas sage, algerita, Apache plume.

The dilemma of how to have a beautiful, satisfying landscape without some non-natives is one that all native plant lovers face. A few years ago I developed a strip on the south side of the house that is almost all native. This is my laboratory in which I try to have an aesthetically pleasing native plant garden. It works pretty well, but is still missing a couple of the elements of traditional landscaping design. I'm still looking for the right tree and evergreen shrubs that would make this area beautiful all year long without having to resort to non-natives.

Beth Herschman is a landscape designer and a past president of the Albuquerque Chapter, NPSNM. Currently she serves as president of the Council of Albuquerque Garden Clubs.

The Book Corner: Butterfly Landscapes of New Mexico



The fascinating world of butterflies is related in this appealing book, *Butterfly Landscapes of New Mexico*, by Steven J. Cary, trained biologist and superb photo-

grapher, who has observed New Mexico butterflies for three decades.

Cary departs from the traditional field guide of species listed by genetic relationships; instead, the organization is by geographic region, elevation, and habitat. His stunning life-size photos of butterflies in the wild, which decorate every page, leave no need for diagnostic descriptions of each species.

The unique feature of this book is that it provides information on each insect that is not found in other butterfly books. Our enjoyment of butterfly hunting is enhanced because Cary describes the habitat each butterfly frequents, the time of year to spot it, where it overwinters, and how it is camouflaged.

After an introduction to butterfly biology and life history, Cary surveys the diverse New Mexico landscape with descriptions and photographs. He portrays the butterflies found in each region along with their food plants and preferred habitat. Using this book you can easily identify species living in a particular area. Or, if you are on the hunt for a special kind of butterfly, you can find the best place to see it. Scattered throughout the text are interesting sidebars on such subjects as early New Mexico butterfly hunting, the place of butterflies in the ecosystem, and plant succession.

The book contains a checklist of the more than three hundred species of New Mexico butterflies, with common and scientific names, along with a bibliography, glossary, and information about where to find specific butterflies in New Mexico's state parks.

Butterfly Landscapes of New Mexico is small enough to take on hikes in a backpack, and at other times may be placed on a coffee table for occasional perusal of its colorfully illustrated pages. But once you start paging through it, you will find yourself reading this charmingly written, information-packed book from cover to cover.

Carolyn Dodson
Book Sales Coordinator

Take Advantage of Member Discounts

The following local nurseries have agreed to give members of NPSNM a 10% discount on plants when you show your membership card:

Great Outdoors Native Plant Nursery
10408 Second Street NW (n. of Alameda)
Albuquerque, NM 87114
505-890-5311
greatoutdoorsabq.com/home.htm

Plants of the Southwest
6680 4th Street NW (n. of Osuna)
Albuquerque, NM 87107
505-344-8830
www.plantsofthesouthwest.com/

Santa Ana Garden Center
The Pueblo of Santa Ana
157 Jemez Dam Road
Bernalillo, NM 87004
505-867-1322
(I-25 N., exit 550 W. to Jemez Dam Rd.)
www.santaana.org/garden.htm

Please support these nurseries and take advantage of the discount being offered to NPS members!

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