

# Interesting Southwestern Discoveries



How do cowboy movies relate to Harborist conferences? Well ... Every year during the first week of December I look forward to spending at least four days at the annual conference of the American Society of Consulting Arborists. ASCA is a society of experienced arborists who have devoted themselves to "...bring(ing) a comprehensive, objective viewpoint to the diagnosis, appraisal and evaluation of arboricultural issues." The conference is an excellent venue for gaining new insights and information both through seminars and valuable networking with long-time colleagues and friends from all over the country. In previous years we've enjoyed the attractions in and around places like Napa, Palm Springs, Philadelphia, Boston and Newport.

But the conference this year was in Tucson Arizona, a southwestern city that until recently and in fact through all of my sixty-four years I have known only by reputation and only by the famous legend of a mid-day horse corral shootout in nearby Tombstone.

lore even though I was still continually reminded of those old western movies by that classic scenery.

plant world. Yet while it is frequently imagined to be exclusively a soft pulpy plant, it has a skeleton of hard wood which makes it durable even with its shallow root system. The slow-growing and long-lived Saguaro usually does not add the first of it's characteristic "arms" until it is about seventy-five years old.

Another fascinating desert tree is the Palo Verde. Arizona's state tree comes in two flavors, Little Leaf (*Cercidium microphyllum*) and the Blue Palo Verde (*C. floridum*). Maybe for me the most interesting feature of the Palo Verde (Spanish for "green wood or stick") is its evolved ability to photosynthesize through its green bark.

This is important to the plant's survival in the desert since during the summer hot season it typically drops leaves and branches. The Palo Verde also serves as a "nurse plant" for the Saguaro cacti by providing canopied shade and warmth during the cacti's early days. Palo Verdes range through central and south-



Saguaro Cactus

The Arizona-Sonoran Desert Museum is a blue ribbon fast course in desert flora and fauna featuring over 1300 types of plants and 300 desert-living creatures. For this arborist, one of the most interesting new *extra-conference* discoveries was to learn about two fascinating plants that will never be found occurring naturally in the Mid-South. The Saguaro Cactus, possibly the official plant icon of the American Southwest, is an amazing structure that can tower up to thirty-plus feet in height with a potential 18" to 24" girth. Getting up close to a big one is an experience. It's flower, which appears every year regardless of rainfall, is the Arizona state flower. Typically in the background of many old southwestern "cowboy movies", this

prickly – Yes, it features dangerous two-to-three inch thorns! – and majestic water tank can hold up to a ton of water in its porous swelling tissue; the camel of the



Saguaro Cactus

To my delight there proved to be much more in and around Tucson than just historic old-west folk-



Palo Verde

ern Arizona and southeastern California.

And I didn't even mention Eucalyptus. There is so much of interest in and around Tucson and the southwestern desert to see and learn about that I now find that I would enjoy a soon return visit.