

Color Blast

Fourth Annual Desert Guide Tour

Perhaps the most radical of the four dry-land gardens featured on the tour in Borrego Springs this weekend is the one with all the annuals. That's because it's so out of character for the desert. "Iceland poppies, alyssum, petunias, pansies — color spots, hundreds and hundreds of them are all over the back and front yard," says Valerie Lemke, who is on the tour's committee and has had a preview of this year's offerings.

Joan Putney, the tour's chairwoman, who selects the gardens each year, showed a local garden writer this place last week. "She said, 'Well, now, this is a San Diego garden,' which it is. The lady

who lives there loves flowers. It's just a blast of color when you drive up to it. The garden writer is more into no turf at all. But this shows that, if that's not your inclination, you don't have to have it. It's on a golf course, so you get the contrast of the bright color and fragrance with the solid green. And she's got these huge orange-flowered vines climbing up into the trees. It's a small garden but spectacular."

While the garden of native palms at a Cliff May ranch house is the main horticultural attraction at the next stop, the dwelling seems to be the greater marvel. You won't be able to go inside, but it has an "outdoor" room. "Cliff May is considered the father of the California ranch," says Putney. "He's built a lot of places in San Diego County. This one is about 30 years old, with a shake roof, and it's all spread out."

The press release says that the place, "nestled under Indian Head mountain," has been designed to accommodate "large, gala gatherings." Lemke is asked



Desert Flora, family farm



Golf course garden with annuals

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what that means, exactly. "I think it means they have parties, with lots of people, and if they don't, they're equipped to do so." The interior patio has a pool, an outdoor fireplace, a fountain that "looks kind of Moorish," a long banquet table with "Mexicany leather chairs," and "big braziers that can be turned on to warm the place if the owners are having a party in January."

Putney herself has seen the walled-in patio's retractable roof both open and closed. In the daytime, it provides shade; at night, you can see the stars.

Owners of the third garden on the tour seem to have taken the concept of dry-land landscaping most seriously. Some cacti you'll see here are reportedly

20 feet tall. "It takes a long time to grow cacti as tall as these are," says Lemke. One type she mentions is the saguaro. "You see them in Arizona — they're the ones with arms coming out from the trunk. I had never seen them before in Anza-Borrego."

This garden features plants of interest both inside and outside its walled area. "The inner yard is protected," says Putney. "Beyond it I'm going to have the owners mark the trails with the little flags that engineers use. It's like a jungle. And when you walk out there, you'll hear little scurrying things." Bobcats, coyotes, antelope squirrel, and pocket rats make their home there — "and lots of birds, because of those towering trees."

The last stop on this self-paced tour is a public place — a commercial enterprise. Just four years old, Desert Flora is a 40-acre organic family farm run by John Hogan and his wife. "It used to be barren," says Lemke. "It was pure sand," says Putney. "Now they have the best peaches I've ever tasted. The trees have already blossomed, and the fruit's forming. They're the earliest peaches in the nation. And they're not all the same kind, so in season you can find out which ones you like best and which ones grow best out here."

Hogan, a professional horticulturist for Ellis Farms in Borrego Springs, also grows dates — a dozen kinds, with chromatic names like Black Beauty, Blonde, and Ruby, as well as

more exotic sounding ones, like Dayri, Zahibi, Abbada, and Barhi.

Dried gourds are for sale here, too. "There are hundreds and hundreds set out on tables. They grow all different kinds," says Lemke. "I took a photograph, and it shows two of them growing up into the trees — they look like pythons."

"I don't know how they ever do it," says Putney, who notes that rainfall so far this year has been only 1.2 inches. "And if you could have seen some of the winds that we have had down in that area, where it's sandy, I don't know how the plants withstood it. Then they were hit with a freeze."

Desert Flora's little sign on Palm Canyon Drive is more than unobtrusive. "It's so small that people really don't see it," says Putney, who is already scouting for next year's tour offerings. "But when I went in and saw the place, I said, 'Now, that's a garden.'"

— Jeanne Schinto



Cactus garden

**Fourth Annual
Desert Garden Tour
Sunday, March 24,
9:30 a.m.–4:00 p.m.
Desert Nature Center
652 Palm Canyon Drive
Borrego Springs
\$10, members of Anza-Borrego
Desert Natural History Association;
\$15, nonmembers
Info and reservations:
760-767-3098**