Celebrating Life in the Chihuahuan Desert

Letter from the Director
Cultivate our Gardens by Daniel Carey-Whalen, Director

“We must cultivate our garden.” This was the conclusion of Candide, the protagonist of the French philosopher Voltaire’s 1759 satire by the same name. After 80 pages of adventure, war, disease, and other horrible events, Candide and his friends survive (albeit with some missing body parts) and settle on a farm in Transylvania, where they proceed to be bored. One of Candide’s friends exclaims, “human beings are destined to live in either convulsive anxiety or lethargic boredom.” Sound familiar! Personally, all this coronavirus is filling me with anxiety and being stuck at home with my kids, I can definitely understand the boredom part. However, I believe Voltaire’s Candide provides us with two great tools to fight the anxiety and boredom: the Humanities and gardening.

Although the Centennial Museum is the only natural history museum in El Paso, the core of our staff and nearly half our collections are more Humanities-based. I have spent much of my life studying, teaching, and working in Humanities fields and I would argue that in this time of quarantines, we need the Humanities now more than ever. Pick up a great piece of literature, either a book in your house or something online.
Look through some amazing museum collections, do some genealogical research, or take a virtual tour of a museum or battlefield (see our list of recommended museums below). Learn a new language or watch YouTube videos that analyze popular culture or explain how other cultures live. This is what the Humanities do! They are what ties human-beings together. As Aristotle said, humans are “by nature a social animal.” Although we must practice physical distancing, we cannot deny our social needs. Let the Humanities give you that outlet and check the Centennial Museum’s website and social media for more tools to help you connect (digitally) with fellow humans.

Yet, Candide also reminds us that with all the craziness occurring in the world, we must “cultivate our garden.” Since I moved to El Paso over seven years ago, I have become a gardener, thanks in part to the Chihuahuan Desert Gardens and our former Garden Curator, John White. Most weekends, you can find me outdoors pulling weeds, watering plants, and pruning bushes in my xeroscaped yard. However, this past week, I have gardened almost daily, and man, is my yard looking great! I have also noticed that more of my neighbors are gardening. Gardening can be very meditative. It can give you a sense of accomplishment. The weather is perfect, so get some vitamin D and fresh air and a little bit of exercise. You can also take a walk in your neighborhood and see how your neighbor’s yards are doing. Redbuds are just finishing their blooms, as are Texas Mountain Laurels, but now there are cacti in bloom and other trees starting to bud. If you need to get out of the neighborhood, you can always hike in the mountains or come to the Chihuahuan Desert Gardens at UTEP. There are so many things in bloom right now that it is sure to break your cabin fever.

So, read a book, enjoy some outdoor time, and keep an eye on the Museum and Gardens website for more content.

See you next month.

Daniel Carey-Whalen

**Engage from Home**

Our sister botanical gardens throughout the Southwest have also had to close due to COVID-19 and like the Chihuahuan Desert Gardens, they are moving to put more and more content online. Here are some of the staff’s favorite gardens in the region that have interactive websites.

- [Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum](#) in Tuscon AZ
- [Desert Botanical Garden](#) in Phoenix AZ
  - They also have a fun [Instagram page](#)
- [Tuscon Botanical Garden](#) in Tucson AZ
  - If you need something to look at while you meditate or need to relax, try their Butterfly Magic livestream!
Chihuahuan Desert Gardens
Notes for April 2020 by Kevin Floyd, Botanical Curator

Spring is in full effect at the Chihuahuan Desert Gardens. Early season bloomers like the Smallflower peachbush (*Prunus minutiflora*) and Havard’s plum (*Prunus havardii*) are done flowering, and our Mexican redbuds (*Cercis canadendis var. mexicana*) are mostly done after another spectacular show.

Several species of penstemons and sumacs are in full bloom, and our Mexican gold poppies (*EschscholAZia californica ssp. mexicana*) continue providing color throughout the gardens. We were looking forward to welcoming visitors to the gardens as part of this spring’s FloraFEST, our native plant sale. However, we have postponed the sale due to public health concerns about the coronavirus. We hope to have the sale this fall, a great time to plant our native species in your yard. Please follow us on Facebook and Instagram, or visit our website, for updates on a fall sale.

As many of us are doing our part to flatten the curve and slow the spread of the coronavirus by staying at home, now is a great time to cultivate your own garden. The El Paso County Master Gardeners provide all the information you need to plant vegetables and ornamentals, maintain a lawn, and keep all the plants thriving in our challenging climate. The New Mexico Native Plant Society also has lot of information about growing native plants and selecting plants to attract pollinators and beneficial insects to your yard.

As you are exploring your yard, it is fun to learn to identify the plants and animals present. For bird identification, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology has an app called Merlin that is really helpful, especially if you are a beginning bird watcher. For plants and insects, the app that I turn to the most is iNaturalist. You can either download the app on your phone, or upload pictures on the website. Either way, the program has the incredible ability to suggest the identity of the organism. I’m often amazed at how well it works. The website has a lot of tutorials to get you up and running.
You can also use iNaturalist to participate in this year’s City Nature Challenge. This event runs April 24-27, and all you need to do is submit observations of the nature in your yard to iNaturalist! All observations made in El Paso County during that time will be included in the results. You can follow along at the iNaturalist page for El Paso. And don’t assume your yard won’t have anything to observe! There are often lots of insects present that we do not usually notice. When you study the flowers, what pollinators are present? In addition to the commonly seen honeybee, there are hundreds of species of native bees in the Chihuahuan Desert. What butterflies are you seeing? Did you know that some species of flies and beetles are also pollinators? There is a lot to learn when you take the time to quietly observe your yard.

I hope that you and your loved ones are enjoying spring in El Paso while staying safe at home, and I look forward to seeing you in the gardens when this is over.

Kevin Floyd, Ph.D., Botanical Curator

Engage from Home (continued)

Here are some more of the staff’s favorite sites to visit online.

- Philbrook in Tulsa OK
- Peabody Essex Museum in Salem MA
- Crystal Bridges of American Art in Bentonville AR
- Harvard Museum of Natural History in Cambridge MA
- Smithsonian in Washington DC
- Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Gardens in Cincinnati OH