



Monthly NEWSLETTER

SECTIONS:



MUSEUM HIGHLIGHTS



HAPPY HOLIDAYS



POINSETTIA
HISTORY



LEAVE THE LEAVES



THE RETURN OF
THE SUN



MEET THE STAFF



HOLIDAYS AND EVENTS

MUSEUM HIGHLIGHTS

FAREWELL, CULTIVATING YOUR HOME!

After more than a year of celebrating the richness, resilience, and beauty of the Chihuahuan Desert, the exhibition **Cultivating Your Home: Embracing Chihuahuan Desert Diversity** is approaching its final days. What began as an invitation to look closely at the plants, wildlife, and stories that make this desert unique grew into a space where visitors could reflect on how native gardens help us connect more deeply with the place we call home.

The exhibition first opened on October 12, 2024, and later extended through December 20, 2025, due to sustained public interest. The exhibition explored how cultivating native plants in our own yards can support biodiversity, conserve water, and create safe havens for wildlife threatened by development and climate change. Through its

displays, *Cultivating Your Home: Embracing Chihuahuan Desert Diversity* highlighted the extraordinary variety of life found in the Chihuahuan Desert: thousands of plant species, hundreds of bird species, countless insects, and even fish found nowhere else on Earth.

As the closing date approaches, these are truly the last chances to visit. Whether you've been meaning to see it and haven't yet, or you want to experience it once more before it's gone, now is the perfect time to stop by and explore the stories and landscapes that shaped this exhibition.

Don't miss the opportunity to walk through *Cultivating Your Home: Embracing Chihuahuan Desert Diversity* before it closes and take one final moment to appreciate the beauty and biodiversity of our desert region.



PLANT OF THE MONTH MEXICAN PINYON

The Mexican Pinyon is a slow-growing pine tree that can take several years to develop a dense crown. It is an evergreen tree, reaching 5 to 10 m (16-32 ft) tall. It grows on dry, rocky hillsides and at the foothills of mountains in dry to temperate sub-humid climates. But did you know that pine nuts are an indispensable ingredient in Mexican cuisine? Pine nuts are edible kernels from pine trees, and it is perfectly acceptable to call them nuts or seeds. And these are widely used in Mexican cuisine, mainly in sweets, ice cream, *Jamoncillo de Leche*, and cakes. This nut is a key ingredient in the correct preparation of *Chiles en Nogada*, one of the most characteristic dishes of Mexican culture.

HAPPY HOLIDAYS

FROM THE CENTENNIAL MUSEUM!

As we enter this holiday season, I want to take a moment to express my deepest gratitude to each of you, our visitors, supporters, and community members. This year has been filled with meaningful moments and important accomplishments, and none of them would have been possible without your presence, your encouragement, and your generous contributions.

Thank you for joining us for the opening of our newest exhibition, Biodiversity Hotspots Reimagined, for attending one of our many events, such as Florafest, and for engaging with the mission of the Centennial Museum & Chihuahuan Desert Gardens. Your interest and enthusiasm continually remind us why our work matters and how valuable it is to share and preserve the natural and cultural richness of our region.

I would also like to extend a sincere thank you to all our collaborators, whose dedication made every lecture, program, and exhibition possible throughout the year. And, of course, to the entire team at the Centennial Museum and Chihuahuan Desert Gardens, your professionalism, commitment, and passion are at the heart of the experience we offer our visitors.

As we look forward to the year ahead, I hope it brings new opportunities, growth, and prosperity for both you and our museum. Thank you for your trust, your support, and for being an essential part of this community.

Wishing you a joyful holiday season and a bright, hopeful New Year.

Sincerely,



Daniel J. Carey-Whalen
Centennial Museum Director



THE STORY BEHIND THE POINSETTIA AND ITS DISTINCTIVE RED COLOR

Have You Ever Wondered Where The Poinsettia Comes From and How it Gets its Iconic Red Color?

Poinsettia, or *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, originates from the southern states of Guerrero, Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Puebla in Mexico. In Nahuatl culture, the plant was known as *cuetlaxóchitl*, meaning “the flower that withers,” “leather flower,” or “resistant flower.” It was valued for its medicinal uses and played an important role in agricultural and solar ceremonies.

A Flower of Tradition

During the colonial period, Catholic priests living in Taxco began using the plant to decorate Christmas masses because of its vibrant color. Over time, this practice inspired the name *Noche Buena* in Spanish, linking the plant with Christmas Eve celebrations.

How Did It Reach the United States?

The Poinsettia became known in the United States thanks to Joel Roberts Poinsett, the first U.S. ambassador to Mexico. Captivated by the plant’s striking color and structure, he sent cuttings to South Carolina in 1828, where they were cultivated and distributed.



Why Is the Poinsettia Red?

Although we recognize it for its bright red color, the poinsettia is not naturally red. The plant begins as green, and the red coloration appears due to a phenomenon known as photoperiodism, the plant’s response to the balance between daily light and darkness.

To turn red, the poinsettia requires 12 to 14 hours of uninterrupted darkness for several weeks. Under these conditions, the plant produces anthocyanins, pigments responsible for the red hue.

Interestingly, the red portions are not petals, but modified leaves called bracts. The true flowers of the poinsettia are the small, yellow structures at the center, known as cyathia.

A Symbol Rooted in Mexican History

From its origins in Indigenous tradition to its connection with colonial festivities and its spread to the United States, the poinsettia has become a global symbol of the holiday season. Its deep red color, cultural legacy, and botanical uniqueness continue to brighten homes, celebrations, and museum gardens every December.



- Ecke, P., Faust, J. E., & Bierman, M. (2004). The Poinsettia Manual. *Paul Ecke Ranch*.
- Heidel, S. M. (2007). Photoperiodism and flowering in poinsettia. *HortScience*, 42(5), 1070–1074.
- Poinsettia: From the Wilds of Mexico to America's Favorite Holiday Flower. (2012). *Smithsonian Gardens*.
- Rodríguez, L. (2015). La Cuetlaxóchitl en la Tradición Mexicana. *Instituto de Biología, UNAM*.
- Taylor, R. (2002). The Legend and History of the Poinsettia. *Economic Botany*, 56(4), 378–384.
- Villaseñor, J. L. (2016). Diversidad de Euphorbia en México. *Revista Mexicana de Biodiversidad*, 87(1), 1–12.

NYILO: THE WINTER FESTIVAL THAT CELEBRATES “THE RETURN OF THE SUN” IN BHUTAN

This December, many of us celebrate Christmas and New Year’s. We exchange gifts, enjoy special meals, put up decorated trees, and embrace a festive spirit. However, every place in the world has its own unique way of celebrating this time of the year.

In the western regions of Bhutan, especially Punakha, Wangdue Phodrang, and Thimphu, communities celebrate *Nyilo*, a winter solstice festival whose name literally means “the return of the sun.” For the people of this region, Nyilo marks an important shift: after the shortest day of the year, the sunlight begins to return, bringing longer days ahead. For agricultural communities, this is deeply symbolic, as it means more daylight and more time to work in the fields.

Nyilo is also considered an auspicious time for spiritual renewal. It is believed that good deeds multiply during this period and that it is a meaningful moment to let go of negativity from the past year.

One of the most unique traditions takes place on the eve of Nyilo. Children and teenagers walk through their villages in groups, going door to door to recite *Lolay*, traditional verses that offer blessings and good wishes for the new cycle. Families welcome them with food or small gifts in appreciation for their well-wishes.

Nyilo reminds us that around the world, people celebrate the change of seasons, hope, and new beginnings in different ways. And even though our customs may vary, they all share something essential: a search for light, community, and renewal.



Daily Bhutan. (2023). Bhutan's time-honored tradition: Exploring the Nyilo season and the Lolay ritual. <https://www.dailybhutan.com/article/bhutans-time-honored-tradition-exploring-the-nyilo-season-and-the-lolay-ritual>
Office Holidays. (n.d.). Winter Solstice in Bhutan. <https://www.officeholidays.com/holidays/bhutan/winter-solstice-in-bhutan>
Wikipedia. (2024). Nyilo. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nyilo>
YouTube. (2019). Nyilo – Bhutan's winter solstice tradition [Video]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cqd3WFjE7eg>
Queen Jetsun Pema. (2019, January 3). Children reciting traditional Lolay verses [Facebook post]. <https://www.facebook.com/QueenJetsunPema/posts/1951840484863970>

WHY LEAVING THE LEAVES IS IMPORTANT

Supporting biodiversity one backyard at a time

Every fall, when trees begin to shed their leaves, many of us feel the urge to tidy everything, rake, bag, and throw them away. Conservation groups across the U.S. have been advocating for a different approach: **leave the leaves**.

This simple action can make a significant environmental impact, especially in arid regions like the Chihuahuan Desert, where every bit of organic material supports life in harsh conditions. Leaving fallen leaves on the ground isn't messy or neglectful; it's a way to support a hidden ecosystem many people never see.

Dry leaves create shelter for insects, butterfly and moth larvae, beetles, and small pollinators that depend on protected spaces to survive colder temperatures.



National Wildlife Federation. (2023). Leave the leaves. <https://www.nwf.org>
The Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation. (2022). Leave the leaves to save the bees, butterflies, and fireflies. <https://www.xerces.org>
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. (2020). Sustainable landscaping: Using leaves and yard waste as resources. <https://www.epa.gov>

These insects then become food sources for birds that overwinter in our region. As leaves naturally break down, they enrich the soil, providing nutrients for native plants without the need for chemical fertilizers. In borderland communities where water is scarce and soil can be fragile, leaving the leaves helps retain moisture, reduce erosion, and create microhabitats for wildlife in gardens, parks, and even small urban spaces. It's one of the simplest and most cost-effective ways to support urban biodiversity.

"Leave the Leaves" isn't just an environmental trend; it's a reminder that healthy landscapes are not always perfectly clean or manicured. Sometimes, the best thing we can do is step back and let nature follow its own rhythms.

MEET THE STAFF

Miranda González joined the Centennial Museum & Chihuahuan Desert Gardens at the end of May, taking on two essential roles within the museum: graphic design and front-desk support. Although this is her first job, she has quickly become an important part of the team thanks to her creativity, dedication, and eagerness to learn.

In her day-to-day work, Miranda assists at the front desk, welcomes visitors, and provides general information. But her biggest contribution is in design. She creates the social media posts we share with our community and designs several of the flyers and visual materials used to promote our events and exhibitions.

What she enjoys most about working here is the creative freedom, being able to propose ideas, design in her own style, and see how her work helps shape the museum's visual identity. She also values the positive work environment and the opportunity to learn from others.

Miranda fondly remembers a moment in the gardens when she found a carpenter bee and, together with the team, gently placed it in a flower bed so it could recover. For her, that small gesture captures the essence of the museum: caring for, observing, and appreciating the life around us.



We asked Miranda who she would like to be for a day. She would choose Amanda, the Curator of Collections, to see firsthand how historical pieces are handled and preserved.

Miranda describes her experience here with one word: multitasking. Between design work, greeting visitors, assisting with events, and taking on different tasks, each day brings something new and has helped her grow professionally. Outside the museum, she enjoys going to the movies with her little sister and creating memorable moments together. Her favorite book to recommend is *Binding 13* by Chloe Walsh, and if she could travel anywhere in the world, she would choose Ireland the setting of the story she loves so much.

DECEMBER DIY

SUGAR BUÑUELOS: A BORDERLAND HOLIDAY TRADITION

In the El Paso–Ciudad Juárez region, December carries the warm scent of cinnamon, frying dough, and family gatherings. Sugar buñuelos are a beloved, crispy, and sweet borderland tradition that is present in posadas, community events, and holiday tables on both sides of the border.

Although buñuelos are traditional throughout Mexico, in the border region, they symbolize cultural connection. Their simple preparation and unmistakable crunch reflect a shared identity shaped by Mexican roots, Southwestern influences, and a strong sense of community.

Below is a shortened classic recipe that captures this familiar borderland flavor.

Sugar Buñuelos

Ingredients:

(Makes 12–15 buñuelos)

2 cups flour
1 tsp baking powder
Pinch of salt
2 tbsp sugar
2 tbsp shortening or melted butter
1 egg
½ cup warm water
Oil for frying
Sugar + cinnamon for coating

Instructions:

Mix dry ingredients; add shortening, egg, and warm water until a soft dough forms. Knead and rest.

Divide into small balls and roll each one very thin.

Fry in hot oil until golden.

Coat warm buñuelos in sugar and cinnamon.

Border tip:

Often served with café de olla in Juárez and with Mexican-style hot chocolate in El Paso.



DECEMBER HOLIDAYS

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

4

DAY



Wildlife Conservation Day reminds us of the urgent need to protect the natural world and the species that sustain global ecosystems. Wildlife crime, such as illegal poaching, trafficking, and the sale of animal products, continues to threaten biodiversity worldwide.

Species like rhinos, elephants, tigers, pangolins, gorillas, and sea turtles face critical risks due to these practices.

At the Centennial Museum & Chihuahuan Desert Gardens, we highlight the importance of conservation, education, and responsible stewardship to protect vulnerable wildlife and their habitats. Our efforts include workshops, guest speaker events, garden walks and interdepartmental and local community collaborations.

WORLD SOIL

5

DAY



World Soil Day celebrates the essential role that soil plays in sustaining life. In the Chihuahuan Desert, calcareous soils with high mineral content support unique native species such as sotol, ocotillo, and creosote.

Healthy soil is fundamental for biodiversity, agriculture, and ecological resilience in arid regions like ours.

Protecting soil means protecting the foundation of the desert ecosystem.

NATIONAL

6

MINERS DAY



National Miners Day is a celebration of the proud mining heritage that gave life to The University of Texas at El Paso.

What began in 1914 as the Texas State School of Mines and Metallurgy grew into the vibrant, innovative university we know today, but the Miner spirit has been here from the very beginning.

Today, we honor the miners whose hard work shaped the region's history and the identity of our campus. It is also a day to celebrate the resilience, determination, and pride that define the UTEP community.

From students and faculty to alumni across the world, National Miners Day reminds us of the shared heritage that continues to unite us as Miners.

Go Miners!

DECEMBER HOLIDAYS

INTERNATIONAL 11 MOUNTAIN DAY



International Mountain Day recognizes the ecological, cultural, and hydrological importance of mountains around the world.

In El Paso, the Franklin Mountains are not only a defining feature of our landscape but also play a critical role in recharging the aquifer that supplies water to the region.

When rainfall filters through their layers of rock and soil, it replenishes this essential groundwater system.

Mountains like the Franklins support biodiversity, shape local climate, and help sustain life in the Chihuahuan Desert.

CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

MID-DECEMBER



Every winter, the Christmas Bird Count brings together communities to document bird populations and support conservation efforts.

In the Chihuahuan Desert, species such as roadrunners, quail, hawks, and desert sparrows play key roles in maintaining ecological balance.

This event encourages observation, learning, and participation in the ongoing protection of desert wildlife.

These traditions remind us of the deep connections between people, plants, and place.

WINTER 21 SOLSTICE



The Winter Solstice marks the longest night of the year, and a moment of transition observed by cultures around the world.

In the desert, seasonal shifts in light and temperature influence plant cycles, wildlife behavior, and ecological rhythms.

At the museum, this day serves as a reminder of the interconnectedness between natural cycles, astronomy, and life in the Chihuahuan Desert.

UPCOMING EVENTS



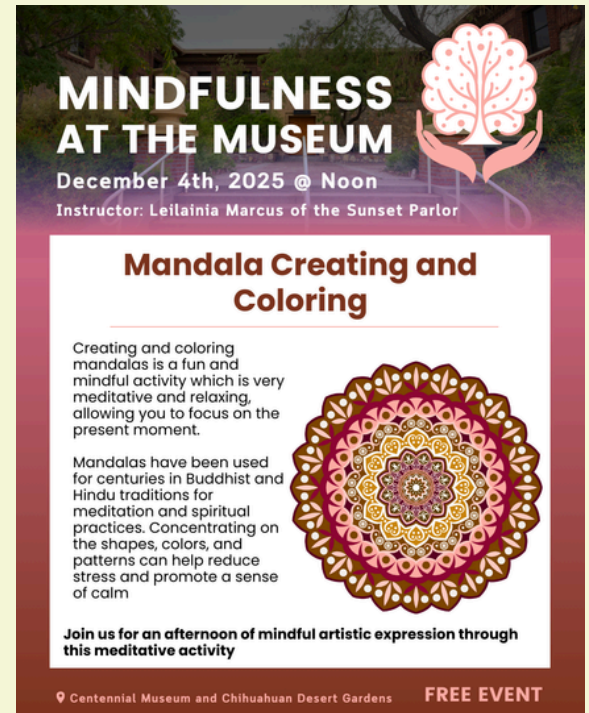
Hot Cocoa Hangout

December 3th 11:30-1:30PM

- Ornament Decorating
- Hot Cocoa
- Pan Dulce / Sweet Bread

We'll also have a selection of unique ornaments available for purchase—perfect for holiday gifting.

UTEP CENTENNIAL MUSEUM AND CHIHUAHUA DESERT GARDENS



MINDFULNESS AT THE MUSEUM

December 4th, 2025 @ Noon

Instructor: Leilainia Marcus of the Sunset Parlor

Mandala Creating and Coloring

Creating and coloring mandalas is a fun and mindful activity which is very meditative and relaxing, allowing you to focus on the present moment.

Mandalas have been used for centuries in Buddhist and Hindu traditions for meditation and spiritual practices. Concentrating on the shapes, colors, and patterns can help reduce stress and promote a sense of calm.

Join us for an afternoon of mindful artistic expression through this meditative activity

Centennial Museum and Chihuahuan Desert Gardens **FREE EVENT**



The Dark Side of the Chihuahuan Desert:

The importance of natural night conditions for insects and their services

Wednesday, December 10, 2025

@ 6:00 PM

Centennial Museum
Refreshments provided

Dr. Brett Seymoure

Assistant Professor and Curator of Entomological Collections at UTEP