

Ocotillo “Little Torch”

By Pam Niesl

Ocotillos (*Fouquieria splendens*) are everywhere here in Southwest Arizona. They certainly have an appearance different from most other plants. Ocotillo is a living mass of tall spiny sticks that sprout small green leaves after substantial rain, and fiery red tassels of flowers in spring. I have a large one in the backyard and my first thought when I moved in was, “What I am to do with this?” As it turns out, pretty much nothing. They love full sun, dry hot temperatures, fast-draining soil and can grow on rocky slopes. No pruning required. They don’t have to be watered, though supplemental irrigation increases growth and vigor. The only real threat to ocotillo is root rot from poor drainage. They can be propagated using large cutting sections or seed. Flowering ocotillos attract hummingbirds and carpenter bees.



Ocotillo “Fun Facts”

Ocotillos have many nicknames - Flaming Sword, Jacob's Staff, Desert Coral, Candlewood, Vine Cactus and Coachwhip.

You can soak ocotillo blossoms overnight to make a sweet tasting juice.

Native Americans, ranchers and others have used ocotillo for fencing, house walls and ramada roofs. The cut, buried stems often root, creating a living fence.

Ocotillo can reach heights of 20 feet and can live 60 years, with some thought to be 100 years.

In 1927 Hal Burns, a Tucson florist, made a life size replica of the Spirit of St Louis from ocotillo to welcome Charles Lindbergh to Tucson.

According to *Medicinal Plants of the Desert and Canyon West* (1989), a fresh ocotillo bark tincture can treat symptoms of fluid congestion, stimulate better visceral lymph drainage and improve dietary fat absorption into the lymph system.

For some people, bathing in water with crushed ocotillo flowers or roots relieves fatigue.

Native Americans placed ocotillo flowers and roots over wounds to slow bleeding.

Ocotillo is also used to alleviate coughing, achy limbs, varicose veins, urinary tract infections, cervical varicosities, and benign prostate growths.



Sources:

(Note: The “Fun Facts” are not from scientific sources)

<http://www.public.asu.edu/~camartin/plants/Plant%20html%20files/fouquieriasplendens.html>

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