



Plants for the Desert Southwest

Artemisia frigida - Fringed sage is a mat-forming perennial to 1 ½ feet tall and wide, with a basal clump of soft, aromatic, feather-textured silvery-blue foliage. It blooms in the summer with foot-tall, slender spikes topped with many small, nodding yellow flower heads. Young plants are quite compact, but can become larger and rangy as they mature. Periodic pruning and shaping will maintain a nice compact form. Fringed sage is native to 3,000-11,000 feet from Alaska to Quebec, south to Arizona and west to Kansas; therefore, for best results in high desert gardens, plant in full sun, well-drained soil, and provide deep infrequent irrigation. Fringed sage can be used in a mass planting as groundcover, in perennial beds, mixed with short grasses, or in a border.

Bouteloua gracilis - Blue grama is a low-growing bunchgrass to 1 ½ feet tall and 10 inches wide, which can spread to some extent by rhizomes. The leaf blades are up to 6 inches long and 1/8 inch wide, bluish green turning to a straw color. Blue grama produces 1-inch seed heads from July to October that curl into a semicircle when dry. Blue grama is native to the western half of North America between 4,000 and 8,000 feet in elevation. Plant in full sun and provide supplemental irrigation every few weeks to encourage abundant production of the ornamental seed heads. Cut back severely in late winter to rejuvenate. Blue grama can be used in perennial flower gardens, wildflower meadows, or as a turf grass, to provide erosion control. Blue grama is hardy to at least 5°F.

Fouquieria macdougalii - Mexican tree ocotillo This relative of Ocotillo is treelike, with a short, stocky, yellowish green trunk to 1 foot thick. In frost-free climates, Mexican tree ocotillo can reach a height of 20 feet, but elsewhere a typical mature size is 6 feet high and 4 feet wide. The brown or reddish branches bear ½-inch gray spines. Mexican tree ocotillo blooms from February to September, following rains, with loose clusters of 1-inch long tube-shaped bright red flowers. Mexican tree ocotillo is native to Mexico. Plant in full sun, well-drained soil and provide supplemental irrigation in summer to promote flowering. Best used as an accent plant in courtyards or patio gardens to provide protection from the cold.

Lippia nodiflora - Frogfruit Frogfruit is a mat-forming ground cover only 3 inches high that spreads to 3 feet. Its stems are smooth and wiry and small-toothed leaves are grouped along the stems at the nodes. Frogfruit's button like clusters of pale lavender-pink, flowers are less than half an inch in diameter but profuse enough to be noticeable, as is the hum of bees gathering nectar. Frogfruit is found between 4,000 and 6,000 feet in elevation on steam banks and in low spots that flood frequently. It is cold hardy to -20°F and spreads faster in filtered shade. It will die back to the ground after frost, so it is best used in small spaces.

Lobelia laxiflora - Loose flowered lobelia Lobelia is a shrubby evergreen perennial that grows rapidly to about 15 inches high by 2 feet wide. Clusters of red tubular flowers with yellow-orange throats bloom throughout the warm season. In oasis zones, or planted around water features, Lobelia will add a lush green feel and attract hummingbirds. This native of the Sonoran Desert is usually found at

elevations from 4,000 to 5,000 feet. Underground rhizomes allow this perennial to recover quickly from temperatures as low as 10°F. Plants prefer shade and moderate amounts of irrigation.

Pedilanthus macrocarpus - Slipper plant's succulent light green stems grow upright from a woody root crown. The jointed stems are mostly unbranched, ¾ inch thick and up to 3 feet tall. The plant can eventually spread to 2 feet wide. Small leaves along the stems drop soon after they appear. Red, 1-inch long slipper-shaped flowers appear during February to May, and August to October. Temperatures below 32°F can damage the young growth of this plant, although mature growth is hardy to the mid-20s F. Slipper plant will do best in full sun and well-drained soil. Once established, provide extra water twice a month during the summer. This plant can provide a strong vertical accent, grounded by low-growing plants.

Russelia equisetiformis - Coral fountain Fountain-like shrubby perennial grows from 3 to 6 feet high and 4 feet wide. *Russelia* has bright green angular stems that are almost leafless. When present, leaves are tiny and scale like. Vivid red tubular flowers ¾ to 1 inch long are scattered along the green stems, blooming almost continuously during the warm season. Plant in full sun and well-drained soil; water every week or two during the warm season but every month once established. *Russelia* can be used for foundation plantings, cascading from planters or containers, or in an area to create a tropical feel.

Saccharum ravenna - Ravenna grass is among the largest and most striking of the cold-hardy ornamental grasses. Upright and clumping, with leaves to 1 inch wide, gray-green, forming a large basal mound to 4 feet tall and wide. Large, plummy inflorescences are produced in late August or early September, on stout, upright stems to 14 feet tall. The flowers are slightly pink-tinted when first opening, quickly turning lustrous silver, standing tall and remaining attractive through winter. Superb for fresh or dried flower arrangements. Best grown in full sun. Very drought tolerant once established. Cold hardy to -10°F. Best used as accent plant, screen, or in riparian or water retention areas. Self-sows in very warm regions.

Nassella (Stipa) tenuissima - Mexican feather grass is among the finest textured of all ornamental grasses, producing a dense green fountain of hair-like leaves and threadlike stems ending in silvery inflorescences with awns more than 3 inches long. Blooms June to September, to 2 feet tall, the inflorescences becoming light straw-colored and remaining attractive into winter. Easily grown on well-drained soil in full sun. Stunning in contrast to rocks or bold-textured companion plantings. Mexican feather grass is very drought tolerant and cold hardy to -10°F. Self-sows readily and can be a minor nuisance.

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