The historical use of plants is distinct from xeriscaping popular today. A look back at what was here, and what was planted by expert gardeners a century ago, provides insight on the developmental history of the desert and informs every neighborhood in the Coachella Valley.

Early settlers saw the similarity between the Southern California desert, North Africa and the Mediterranean (since-given as Southern California cities and streets reflect this, plucked from the south of Spain or France in the same way that the East Coast of the United States features names reminiscent of Northern Europe, or outright copies preceded with “new”).

The similarity in climate and light caused early desert gardeners to try cultivars from the old world to see what might grow. With the addition of water, many things flourished, but the test was whether they would survive the harsh summer and a winter that is generally colder than the Mediterranean Sea.

Citus and other stone fruits are an early example of systematically imported plants. Judge McCallum and the Palm Valley Land Company businessmen planted orchards in a bid to supply the coastal markets with early ripening fruit at the end of the 19th century.

By the turn of the 20th century, different varieties of dates, imported from the Middle East, were tested in the sprawling desert of the eastern Coachella Valley to decide the best type of fruit to farm. In between the rows of stately date palms, citrus was planted to make use of the space.

In the aftermath of the Civil War, the Southern Pacific Railroad traveled through the Sonoran Desert giving the incentive of owning every other square mile by the U.S. government. Along the tracks, they planted allees of tamarisk, imported from South Africa, as windbreaks. Disagreed upon as too thirsty trees, imported from North Africa and the Mediterranean between the Southern California desert, Valley.

In the aftermath of World War II, the Cahuilla Indians under the leadership of the desert, depending upon its offerings for everything from food and shelter to medicines and the staff of religious ritual. A walk through any neighborhood these days finds a sprinkling of plants, with different fascinating histories, some native and some historically used imports.

Numerous species of agave, used as a food by the Indians, and as a balm for sunburn, was a natural sweetener become popular for their striking forms. The citrus plant, pictured in many a brochure of Southern California for its tall blooming stalk, was erroneously supposed to only flower once every hundred years.

Gargantuan unlikely Pinus radiata, Mexican palm, paradise with its tower of orange and yellow flowers, and riots of Bougainvillea offering purple and deep pink decoration, were ubiquitous by the end of the 19th century due to their "enormous splendor." The Cahuilla harvested cactus fruits from the many varieties available. The flaming orange tips of ocotillo branches were used for tea, and also as fencing as the spines are menacing, like an organic barbed wire.

Planted hedges demarcated yards and defined property lines. Scholarly, despite its toxicity, was commonly used in California, including in the desert. Pink, white and deep fuchsia varieties were found lining roads and imported for the center dividers of freeways as those first crisscrossed the state in the 1950s.

But our eponymous plant is the Washingtonia filifera, the fan palm. It is the ultimate native. The sweet fruit pulp could be eaten raw, boiled, or ground into flour for cakes and the leaves used to make sandals, thatch roofs, and basker. Found widely in the cracks in the mountain where water can be found, from Joshua Tree to Indio Hills and the Santa Ana mountains to the Anza-Borrego, these palms define the names that made early life possible in the desert.

Thanks for the memories

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