

The trees of summer: Smoke trees, cacti, palms

Locals welcome sight of the blooming desert flora

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Signaling the end of spring, smoke trees in the desert washes become dotted with tiny bluish-purple blooms at the beginning of summer each year.

The color is deep and distinct and has been revered by desert dwellers for decades. Nellie Coffman herself was known to berate anyone who dared chop down a smoke tree.

Most visitors to the desert had no appreciation for the tree having never seen it in bloom. Visitors evaporated from Palm Springs in May as temperatures increased threatening the coming summer.

But local residents, like Coffman, knew better. Agnes Pelton famously painted "Smoke Tree in Bloom" to be auctioned off to benefit the newly formed Desert Art Center.

Carl Bray, fancied for himself the sobriquet "painter of smoke trees" as they featured regularly on his canvases. Other desert artists like John Hilton, William

Darling and Jimmy Swinerton were captivated by the indigo blooms, buzzing with bees, and memorialized their brief early summer show in paint.

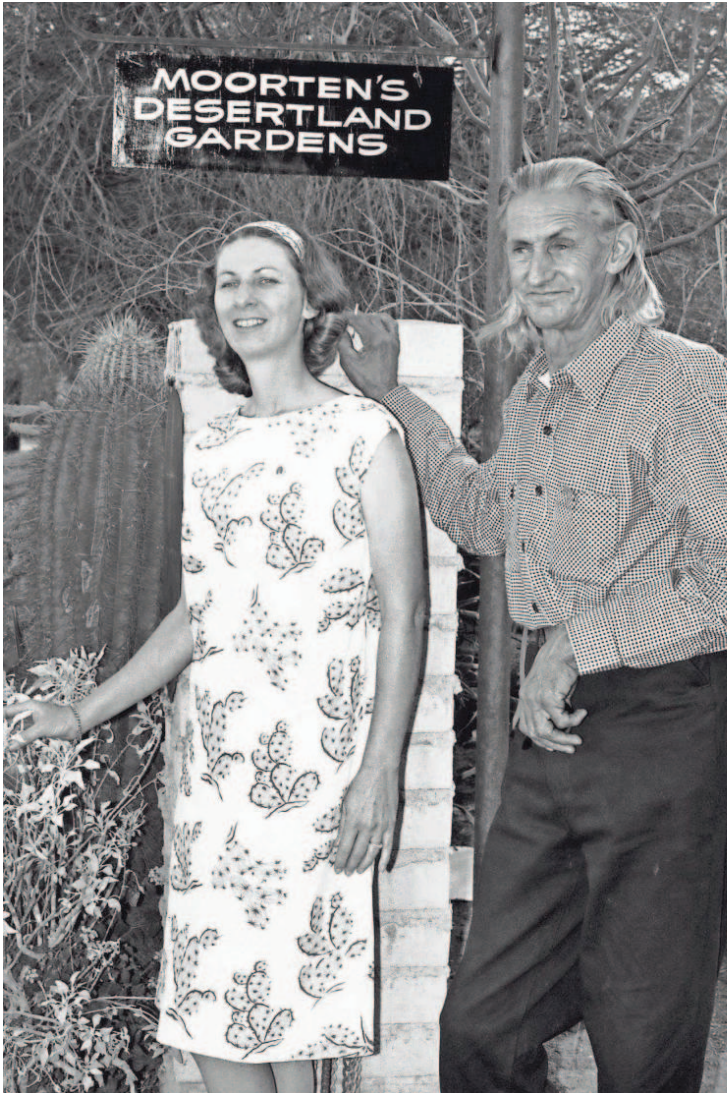
Spring in the desert is spectacular, but summer is even more impressive for the cacti, trees and scrubs that survive it.

Wise and observant desert dwellers had special reverence for the plant species found in this harsh environment.

The village of Palm Springs took its name from the indigenous palms, found in the ravines of the surrounding mountains. The native California fan palm signaled the presence of water to early settlers and Native Americans. The Cahuilla used the fruit of the *Washingtonia filifera* for food and its fronds for weaving and roofing.

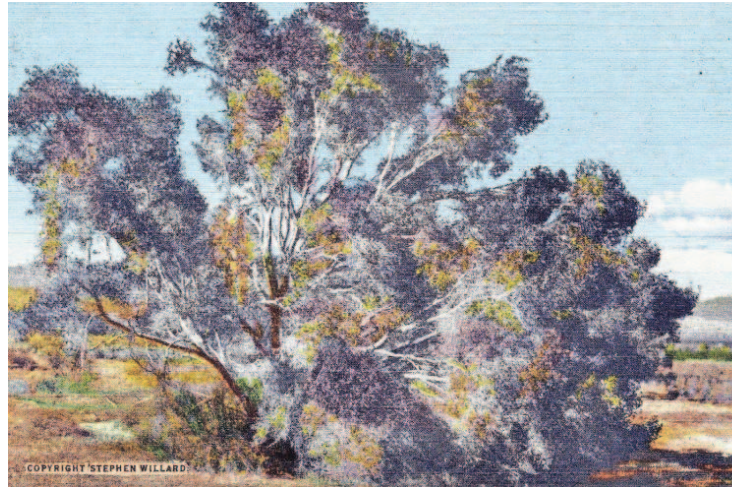
The importation of date palms to the area a century ago started the comparison of the Coachella Valley to the deserts of the Middle East and sparked an agricultural industry. Soon there was cultivation of all sorts of palm species as ornamental trees.

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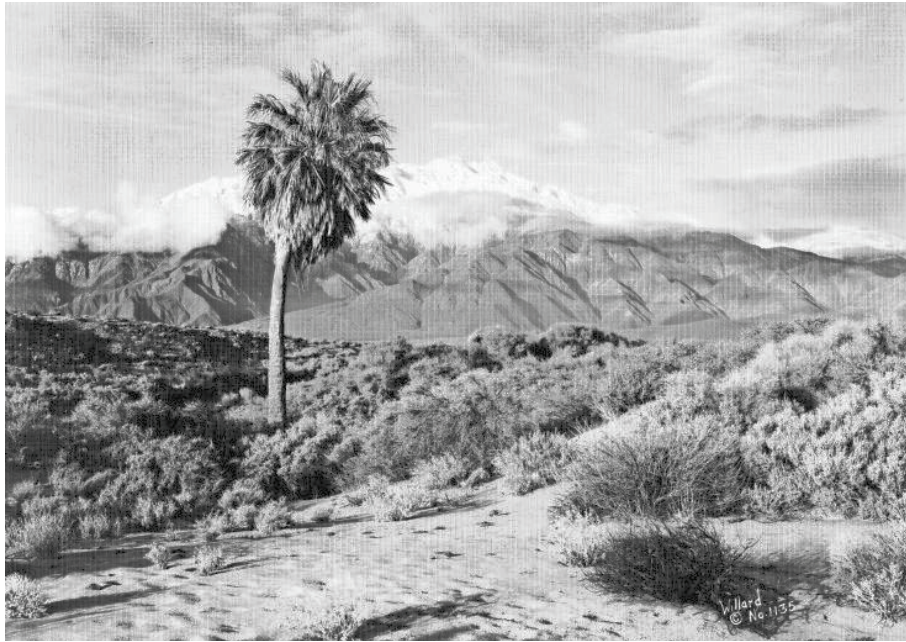


Pat and Cactus Slim Moorten are photographed in December 1964.
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Smoke tree in bloom.



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Palm tree in the desert. PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY/SPECIAL TO THE DESERT SUN

Trees

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Grand allees of palms would soon line the boulevards of Los Angeles and San Diego. In Palm Springs, Ruth Hardy, owner of the Ingleside Inn and the first councilwoman, campaigned for planting palms along both sides of highway III, engendering its name of Palm Canyon Drive.

Soldiering trees marched all the way to the Indian Canyons where the native palms could be found in abundance; the basis for the village itself.

The original summer survivor in the desert is, of course, the cactus. Reverence for its diversity was elevated to an art form by Chester "Cactus Slim" and Patricia Moorten. The Moortens famously saved cacti in the path of road construction for use as ornamentals in gardens.

They collected unusual specimens from all over the desert southwest and Baja Mexico, bringing them home to Palm Springs and transplanting them into the garden plot around their new home (purchased from photographer and painter Stephen Willard who was leaving town because it had gotten too crowded.)

A botanist trained at University of Southern California, Patricia published her classic book, "Desert Plants for Desert Gardens" much before the idea of using native plants in a sustainable way became the norm. The magazine Popular

Mechanics even featured an article on the Moortens in March of 1960.

The Moortens' appreciation of cacti was akin to Nellie's reverence of smoke trees. Locals survived through the tough summers to be rewarded with mild winters and glorious springs, just like native trees, scrubs and cacti.

Locals tried to cultivate an appreciation of the subtleties of desert plants by memorializing the spectacular blooms in postcards and pictures. And they tried to inculcate that appreciation through guidebooks for newcomers.

Melba Bennett, the founder of many Palm Springs institutions including the "Palm Springs Hat," the Palm Springs Historical Society and the Palm Springs Garden Club, wrote a little book just for this purpose. Meant to help new arrivals cultivate a proper desert garden, her little book had practical advice and was annotated in the margins with little whimsical doodles to emphasize her points. The book contains charming descriptions and recommendations gleaned from years of hard work and experimentation in her garden at Deep Well Ranch.

Plants were chosen for their riot of blooms in springtime and their ability to survive the blistering heat of summer.

The diminutive indigo blooms of smoke trees were complemented by the exuberant deep orange bouquets offered by Poinciana, Mexican bird of paradise.

Bennett counseled a variety of colors and shapes in the composition of a garden, and a rotation of flowering to provide interest in the garden through the coming long summer months.