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Big Jim: The Mission Gardens

Jim Griffith, Special to the Arizona Daily Star Aug 16, 2013



Phil Hall, a board member with the Friends of Tucson's Birthplace, arranges the ocotillo fencing on top of a ramada at the Mission Gardens at the base of "A" Mountain on Tuesday, July 31, 2012, in Tucson, Ariz. Some of the pomegranate, fig trees and other plants from the garden area are visible in the background. They are building storage room with a ramada which can be used as a place for educational projects.

If you go

Who: The friends of Tucson's Birthplace

What: Fund-raising breakfast for Tucson's Birthplace project

When: 7-10 a.m. Aug. 25

Where: Mercado San Agustín,
100 S. Avenida del Convento

More information:
tucsonsbirthplace.org or
777-9270



Collection: The best of Big Jim Griffith's blog, "Our Storied Desert Land"

A remarkable historical project is developing at the foot of **Sentinel Peak (or "A" Mountain, if you prefer) — The Mission Garden.** It's a wonderful example of what can be done by a small group of hard-working visionaries.

It occupies a walled, four-acre enclosure on the site of the original garden, and when it's finished, it will be a kind of living agricultural history of Tucson.

Right now it consists of several components. There's a group of "waffle beds" containing a rainy-season garden stocked with historic Hohokam and traditional O'odham rain-fed crops. Next to this summer garden is an orchard containing 121 **authenticated heritage trees, including figs, pomegranates, quinces, apricots, and plums, and 28 Mission grapevines** — all bearing just now.

This is to a great extent the work of a visionary ethnobotanist named Jesús García. He traveled the borderlands, searching for old trees and vines that had been themselves grown from cuttings. When I first saw this orchard, it was a collection of dry-looking sticks; now the trees are in full leaf and loaded with fruit. No surprise there — the orchard supervisor is retired UA arborist Libby Davison.

Finally, **ancient varieties of corn and beans are being planted** in the Early Agricultural area. These plots are based on the gardens that were excavated at an archaeological site near Marana, pushing back the date of agriculture in the Santa Cruz Valley several thousand years. And this is just the beginning; more historic gardens and crops are in the planning stage.

Why am I telling you all this just now? Partly because this is Tucson's birthday month, and mostly because the gardens are now open to visitors on Saturdays from 8 a.m. until noon. Come and see them — they are our past.

And in a sense, they are our future as well. Our community is full of small, carefully-researched, "do-it-yourself" projects like this, many operating on a shoestring, but each adding to our understanding of our community. I'll be telling you about more as we go along.

This one was planned to be part of a much larger, city-funded "Tucson's Birthplace" project, and when the big bucks disappeared, the believers took over and, by golly, made it happen. That's Tucson.

The project is sponsored by a group called "the Friends of Tucson's Birthplace," and they are hosting a fund-raising breakfast at the Mercado San Agustin, on Sunday, Aug. 25 from 7-10 a.m., with tours of the garden available all morning. Delicious (trust me) regional food will be served. For further information call (520) 777-9270, or e-mail at missiongarden.tucson@gmail.com.

And while you're at it, check out "Father Kino's Orchard" down at Tumacacori National Historical Park. It's also Jesús García's work!