

Mexican goldpoppies, lupines and other wildflowers thrive amid Sonoran Desert greenery on a hillside near Bartlett Lake, northeast of the Phoenix area. PAUL GILL

# WILDFLOWERS OF THE SONORAN DESERT

ORIGINAL ARTWORK BY DYANA HESSON  
TEXT BY NOAH AUSTIN

IN HER NEARLY THREE DECADES AS A WORKING ARTIST, Dyana Hesson has made it her mission to photograph beautiful plants, then paint them. “I’ve traveled to some wonderful places,” she says, “but I always return to the desert.”

Desert plants and Arizona light continue to be a source of inspiration for Hesson, particularly in springtime, she says. “The blooms are like the most exquisite jewels adorning a beautiful woman,” she says. “They’re captivating. I can’t help but paint the places and plants of our great state.”

The 11 oil paintings you’ll see in this portfolio constitute a collection Hesson calls *True Blue Arizona*, and we’ve paired them with photos by some of our favorite contributors. The paintings portray plants Hesson encountered in the spring of 2019. “Many things grow here, but these special blooms are Arizona’s own — true blue,” she says. “Also, my trusty flower-hunting Jeep is named True Blue. We both got good and dirty finding inspiration.”

Hesson spent eight months creating the collection; the final piece, *Beeline*, took three and a half weeks to paint. “Truly, art is problem-solving,” she says. “It just takes time: gathering inspiration, deciding what will make a good composition, changing course midway if it doesn’t work on the canvas, all of it. Time is the limited commodity that will keep any artist from doing more. We have only so much we can create in our lifetimes.”

The artist is represented by Bonner David Galleries, at 7040 E. Main Street in Scottsdale. A one-woman show of this collection and more of Hesson’s work is scheduled for March 27 through April 20 at the gallery. For more information and to see Hesson’s other work, visit [dyanahesson.com](http://dyanahesson.com).



*Paint in the Sky*, Sedona, oil on canvas, 28 by 22 inches, 2019

## INDIAN PAINTBRUSH

Genus *Castilleja*

There are hundreds of members of the genus *Castilleja*, which is named for 18th century Spanish botanist Domingo Castillejo. In addition to their colorful blooms and hairy leaves, Indian paintbrushes are known for having edible flowers; however, the roots and green parts should not be consumed, because they tend to absorb toxins from the soils in which they grow. Arizona is home to more than a dozen species of *Castilleja*, and the individual species are notoriously difficult to identify. They’re found in many of the state’s habitats, including arid slopes, wet alpine meadows and desert areas.



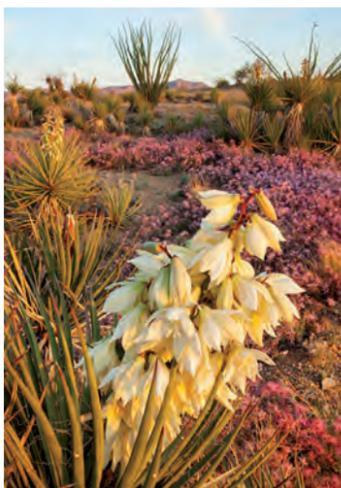


Arizona Dinner Bells, near Superior, oil on canvas, 40 by 30 inches, 2019

## BANANA YUCCA

*Yucca baccata*

One of Arizona's most common types of yucca, the banana yucca gets its name from its fleshy, succulent and banana-shaped fruit, which contrasts with the dry, hard fruits produced by many other yucca species. Apaches and Navajos traditionally used the fruit as a food source, sometimes picking it early and allowing it to ripen off the vine to prevent animals from eating it. The plant is also known for its narrow, spine-tipped leaves and the stalk of flowers it produces in the spring. Banana yuccas can be found on dry plains and hilly grasslands in the American Southwest and Texas.



Super-Duper, Superstition Mountains, oil on canvas, 28 by 22 inches, 2019

## ENGELMANN'S PRICKLY PEAR

*Opuntia engelmannii*

An iconic Sonoran Desert cactus, the Engelmann's prickly pear can be identified by its large pads, yellow flowers and fleshy purple fruit. Found in varied habitats as far west as Southern California and as far east as Mississippi, this cactus blooms in the spring, turning many of Arizona's desert back roads into symphonies of yellow and green. It's become a popular landscaping option, and its fruit was prized by Native Americans and continues to find its way into everything from hot sauce to margaritas. It's one of several plants named for 19th century German-American botanist George Engelmann.



## SAGUARO

*Carnegiea gigantea*

The saguaro is the Sonoran Desert's best-known plant, as at least one photo in just about any issue of *Arizona Highways* can attest. But its bragging rights don't stop there: It's the largest cactus in the United States, and its bloom is the state flower of Arizona, which contains virtually all of the species' U.S. range. The flowers bloom from April to June and are pollinated by bees, bats and white-winged doves; saguaro fruit, which ripens in June, has been harvested for thousands of years by the Tohono O'odham people of Southern Arizona and northern Mexico.



*Beeline*, near Salt River, oil on canvas, 40 by 60 inches, 2019



*Superstition Gold*, Superstition Mountains, oil on canvas, 60 by 40 inches, 2019

## BUCKHORN CHOLLA

*Cylindropuntia acanthocarpa*

The buckhorn cholla is perhaps less familiar to Arizonans than the teddy bear cholla, but it's equally widespread, being found across the Sonoran and Mojave deserts in Arizona and California, at elevations of up to 4,000 feet. It's identified by its thin stems, stiff spines and generally untidy appearance. Like other chollas, the buckhorn spreads via its barbed spines, which stick to wild animals (and hapless hikers) that then carry pieces of the cactus to other locations. Its flowers, which range in color from yellow to red, typically bloom in April or May.



*Roadside Attraction*, Bartlett Lake, oil on canvas, 20 by 16 inches, 2019

## MEXICAN GOLDPOPPY

*Eschscholzia californica*  
*ssp. mexicana*

Depending on the previous winter's rainfall, displays of Mexican goldpoppies along roadsides north and east of the Phoenix area can be spectacular. As the name indicates, this species typically produces orange or golden yellow blooms, but a white version, as seen here, can occasionally be spotted. The cup-shaped flowers bloom from bluish-green stalks that reach heights of 6 to 16 inches. You'll find Mexican goldpoppies in March, April and May; on sunny, dry plains and mesas; and at elevations of 4,500 feet and lower.





*Picnic in the Grass*, Sedona, oil on canvas, 40 by 30 inches, 2019

OPPOSITE PAGE: *Lion and the Lamb*, Sedona, oil on canvas, 40 by 30 inches, 2019

### SEGO LILY

*Calochortus nuttallii*

The sego lily is found in some Western and Plains states; in Arizona, it grows on dry mesas, in pine forests and on hillsides, at elevations of 5,000 to 8,000 feet.

It's easily identified by its tulip-like flowers, which typically are creamy white or lavender and bloom from a 10- to 20-inch stalk from May to July. But the plant is perhaps best known for its edible, onion-like bulb, which Native Americans taught Mormon settlers in present-day Utah to eat in times of scarcity. That history is the reason the sego lily is the state flower of Arizona's neighbor to the north.



PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL GILL



*Profile Picture*, oil on canvas, 40 by 36 inches, 2019

## ENGELMANN'S HEDGEHOG CACTUS

*Echinocereus engelmannii*

The flowers of the Engelmann's hedgehog range in color from bright magenta to pale pink, and they bloom for several consecutive days in April or May. This cactus species can typically be found on rocky plains, in canyons or on hillsides at elevations of 7,000 feet or lower, and it can grow as many as 60 stems and reach a height of 12 inches or so. In the United States, it's found in Arizona, California, Nevada and Utah. This cactus' brilliant flowers make it a favorite among horticulturists, but trying to grow it in poorly drained or overly organic soil can result in root rot.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAUL GILL

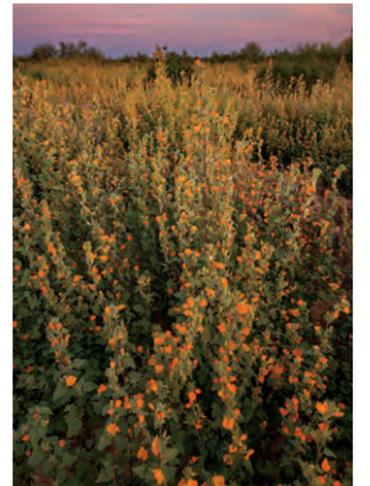


## DESERT GLOBEMALLOW

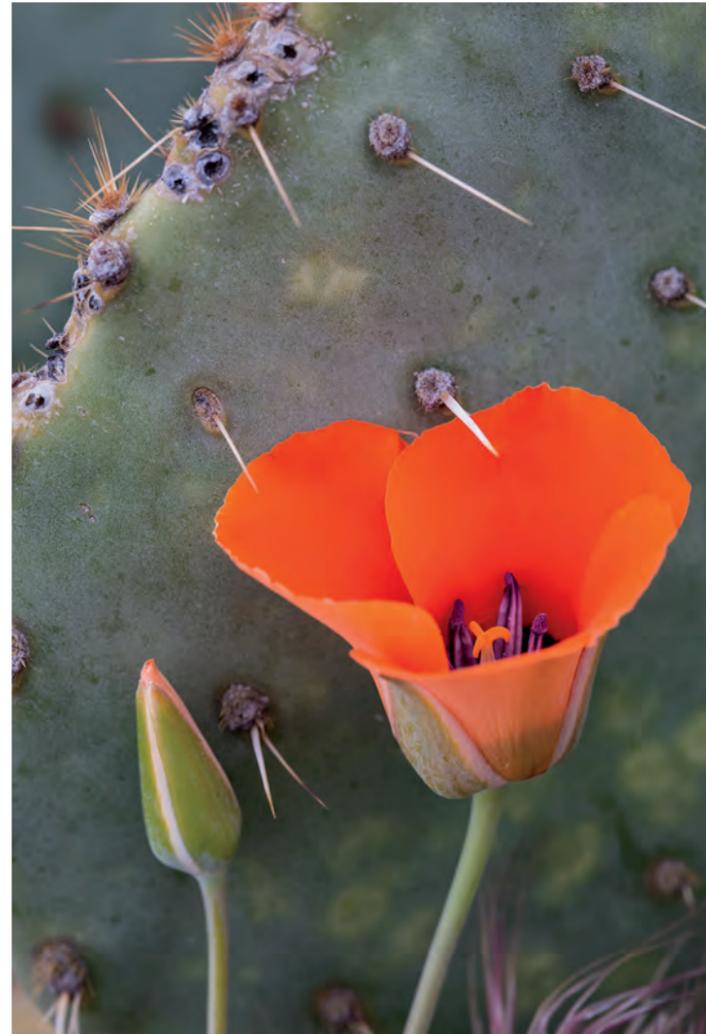
*Sphaeralcea ambigua*

There's an added layer to this study in contrast: Arizona is the only state where both desert globemallows and golden-flowered century plants grow in the wild. The golden-flowered century plant is the rarer of the two, found only in Arizona; in summer, it displays its brilliant yellow flowers on a stalk that can reach 20 feet tall. The desert globemallow, one of the most drought-tolerant globemallow species, can also be spotted in California, Nevada and Utah; it thrives on dry slopes and at the edges of sandy washes, and produces large, red-orange flowers.

*Sonoran Chapel*, Superior, oil on canvas, 40 by 20 inches, 2019



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## DESERT MARIPOSA LILY

*Calochortus kennedyi*

One of the most brilliant of the mariposa lilies, the desert variety produces bulbous orange flowers in spring from stems up to 8 inches long. Here, those orange petals contrast with the white of desert chicory, whose bloom is known for its overlapping petals and yellowish center. Both plant species are found in sandy or rocky desert areas, and both can be spotted in multiple Southwestern states. During the spring wildflower season, these flowers are among the desert's most conspicuous blooms.

**After the Rain**, Santa Catalina Mountains, oil on canvas, 28 by 22 inches, 2019



**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Our thanks to the plant experts at Desert Botanical Garden, in Phoenix, and Boyce Thompson Arboretum State Park, near Superior, for verifying the accuracy of the plant descriptions. For more information about these organizations, visit [dbg.org](http://dbg.org) and [btarboretum.org](http://btarboretum.org). **AH**