

## **Some desert-adapted trees that can tolerate lots of sun; suitable for bonsai in the low desert**

**(from the Phoenix Bonsai Society 2010-2011 Club Year Book)**

**Bougainvillea** (Bougainvillea, spp.) F,W ^ \*  
*older/larger specimens transplant best mid-summer; takes heavy top pruning; cut a branch off just above a thorn to stimulate new bud growth – sometimes cutting below a thorn will cause die back down to the next branch; buds back on old wood; don't bare-root young plants; see our website for additional info on transplanting*

**Elephant Tree** (Bursera microphylla) F,U,W ^ \*  
*a woody tree in the torchwood family with small, thin pinnate leaves; trunk thickens fairly quickly and becomes fissured with peeling bark; part to full sun; loves the heat; leaves are fragrant when crushed; transplants readily, even as bare root; can be grown from cuttings; doesn't mind being root-bound; requires early pinching and pruning to induce branching and trunk-thickening; native to Arizona and Mexico*

**Fragrant Elephant Tree** (Bursera fagaroides) F,U,W, % \*  
*similar to B. microphylla above but more frost-sensitive and with larger, broader leaves (select varieties with smallest leaves); from Mexico*

**Texas Ebony** (Ebenopsis ebano formerly Pithecellobium flexicaule) D R U W ^ %  
*\* small leaves; very hardy and back-buds easily; evergreen to semi-evergreen; dark green leaves on zigzagging thorny branches. Feathery spikes of creamy yellow fragrant flowers in spring and early summer*

**Emu Bush** (Eremophila, spp.) ^ \*  
*dense shrubs of several varieties from Australia; gets leggy but tolerates heavy pruning; good root structure is found on fairly young plants; in a pot it needs lots of water; early spring and summer colorful flowers attract hummingbirds*

**Mexican Ebony** (Havardia mexicana formerly Pithecellobium mexicanum) D R U W % \*  
*small grayish green leaves; deciduous; the young bark is grayish green. Little puffballs of white slightly scented flowers in spring; thorns*

**Tenaza** (Havardiana pallens formerly Pithecellobium pallens) D R U W ^ % \*  
*semi-deciduous; faster growing than Texas and Mexican Ebony; the vanilla-scented puffball flowers from spring through fall are very fragrant; thorns*

**Lantana** (Lantana, spp.) F,U,W % \*  
*cut back heavily just before leaf buds open in late winter; extremely attractive to white flies; trunk very slow to fatten in pot, so start with as big a specimen as you can*

**Olive** (Olea europaea) U,W ^

*watch out for scale insect infestation; better to wire green wood; roots grow quickly, best to reduce root ball down in June or July; transplants best in summer; even cut-back large old landscape specimens are said to transplant successfully; only produces flowers on ends of second-year growth, so a properly trimmed bonsai should never flower; keep suckers growing from trunk base under control; take soft cuttings for rooting in October, March or April*

**Ironwood** (Olneya tesota) D U %

*very small leaves that make beautiful pads with pruning; it can be wired and easily styled as a bonsai; grows fast and buds back readily; it has thorns; semi-deciduous*

**Jabily Tree** (Operculicarya decaryi) F,U %

*this Madagascan tree is a member of the cashew family, growing over 20 feet tall with a trunk 3 ½ feet in diameter in habitat; fine, shiny green pinnate leaves turn almost black in full sun; can be grown from cuttings but quickly forms a thick rippled trunk (reportedly ¾ inch trunk and 15 inch height in 15 months) from seed; available as seeds or cutting-propagated plants on the web or from desert plant nurseries; thrives in heat*

**Acacia** (Acacia, spp.) D F U W ^ \*

*native to Australia, Mexico and Southwest U.S.; over two dozen are hardy here; rarely suffer any pest damage; may become chlorotic in alkaline soil*

**Quailbush** (Atriplex, sp.) % \*

*small-leaved desert species make interesting bonsai*

**Palo Verde/Palo Brea** (Parkinsonia, spp.) D,R,U %

*trimming dead branches off could kill part of the trunk around those branches; Little Leaf Palo Verde (P. micropylla) is slow growing; Blue Palo Verde (P. florida) grows faster as does Palo Brea (P. praecox) from Mexico which has a nicer pale green trunk, but it is more frost-sensitive than the two native species; difficult to repot; repot early in the spring; don't remove too much of root ball; likes a roomy pot*

**Desert Willow** (Chilopsis linearis) U ^ \*

*a vigorous grower; can be over-watered; repot in spring when buds appear; can be potted in a shallower pot than most desert trees; subject to chlorosis if not given supplemental iron*

**Barbados Cherry** (Malpighia glabra) A,C,F,I ^

*prefers high humidity and rich soil mix; water well to flush out salts; likes lots of light*

**Desert Fern / Feather Bush** (Lysiloma thornberi) U % \*

*buds back well from trunk; has a tendency to get leggy if not cut back; repot in spring when new growth appears; relatively easy to pot and will accept root pruning; likes a deeper pot.; will flower in pot culture*

**Elephant Tree** (*Pachycormus discolor*)

F,U,W,%

*the combination of thick trunk, papery bark and short, fine, pinnate leaves is hard to beat; winter grower; often summer deciduous; in cashew family; full sun; don't over-water, especially in cold weather; slow growing; requires early pinching and pruning to induce branching and trunk-thickening; very slow to thicken in pot; start with big specimen; from Mexico*

**Mesquite** (*Prosopis*, spp.)

D,U %

*cuttings easily propagated; allow a small stump to remain when a branch is cut off, the stump will die back; when plant gets too dry will loose leaves quickly*

**Tamarisk, Salt Cedar**

(*Tamarix*, spp.)

D L R W % \*

*easy to grow from ½ - 1 in. cuttings set in soil where they are to grow; transplanting them can be touchy; in containers they have no tap root and require lots of water; they are classified as weeds in Arizona and are rarely found in nurseries; they are able to limit competition from other plants by taking up salt from deep ground water, accumulating it in their foliage, and from there depositing it in the surface soil where it builds up concentrations temporarily detrimental to some plants; the salt is washed away during heavy rains (or deep watering)*

*T. chinensis has blue green foliage. Also called Salt Cedar; semideciduous, may not loose any leaves in a warm winter; resists both heat and cold; flowers at branch ends*

*T. parviflora has pink flowers in spring; graceful arching branches, excellent for weeping style; it will freeze in cold weather, but the main trunk will come back with new branches in the spring; the leaves will yellow if it does not get enough water*

**Elephant's Food / Dwarf Jade** (*Portulacaria afra*)

F,U,W ^

*Hardy, easy to grow; not a true jade, not even related to it, but this is very much hardier and has more compact growth; cuttings over three inches long are very, very easily propagated, so you can start with a branch or trunk portion that is already well shaped and branched; cuttings up to at least two inches in diameter don't need to be callused; rooting hormone not needed whatever the cutting size; to trim, pinch off the second pair of new leaves often; possible to withhold watering on established plants until the largest leaf pads just start to wrinkle from dehydration; leaf pads very easily break off, so use extreme caution if you plan to wire; variegated varieties slower growing; use well-draining soil mix*

### Special Condition Key:

- A prefers more acidic soil; try 1 Tablespoon white vinegar in 1 gallon of water monthly
- B brown leaf or needle tips indicate salt burn from salt build up; often from **too much or too little watering**
- C subject to iron or manganese chlorosis (best iron source is a **cheleated mineral**).
- D subject to random branch **die-back**
- F frost-sensitive, so protect **with frost cloth or bring indoors** if freezing weather is expected
- I more adaptable than other plants for use as an indoor bonsai
- L may drop some leaves when relocated or repotted
- M attractive to spider mites, so hose-spray and keep in good air-flow
- P pinch first set of leaves when opened, the next will be smaller
- R do not root prune if at all possible; never bare root this kind of plant
- S leaves sunburn/windburn easily, provide shelter/protection
- U larger specimens can take **more sun** when established; **caution: increase exposure gradually**
- W bark is tender or branches are brittle, so wire carefully, if at all

Note: Plants labeled as susceptible to chlorosis when grown in the ground should not have this problem in a container with a quality soil mix and regular fertilizer schedule. "Established" plants are firmly rooted and producing a good growth of new buds which have opened up into leaves.

^ evergreen

% deciduous (some varieties or under mild winter conditions may be semi-deciduous)

\* can bloom as bonsai