

Merry Christmas- By Stan Southwick



December is a month full of a variety of multi-cultural celebrations including; Saint Nicholas Day (Christian), Fiesta of Our Lady of Guadalupe (Mexican), St. Lucia Day (Swedish), Hanukkah (Jewish), Christmas Day (Christian), Three Kings Day/Epiphany (Christian), Boxing Day (Australian, Canadian, English, Irish), Kwanzaa (African American), Omisoka (Japanese), Yule (Pagan), and Saturnalia (Pagan).

As for me, I celebrate Christmas. So, I thought I would share a few widely-accepted facts about the Christmas celebration.

The first recorded date of Christmas being celebrated on December 25th was in 336, during the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine (the first Christian Roman Emperor). A few years later, Pope Julius I officially declared that the birth of Jesus would be celebrated on the 25th December. This coincided with the Roman pagan holiday of Saturnalia, a week-long period of lawlessness celebrated between December 17-25. During this period, Roman courts were closed, and Roman law dictated that no one could be punished for damaging property or injuring people during the weeklong celebration.

The Reverend Increase Mather of Boston observed in 1687 that “the early Christians who first observed the Nativity on December 25 did not do so thinking that Christ was born in that Month, but because the Heathens’ Saturnalia was at that time kept in Rome, and they were willing to have those Pagan Holidays metamorphosed into Christian ones.” Because of its known pagan origin, Christmas was banned by the Puritans and its observance was illegal in Massachusetts between 1659 and 1681. However, Christmas was and still is celebrated by most Christians.

Germany is credited with starting the Christmas tree tradition as we now know it in the 16th century when devout Christians brought decorated trees into their homes. Some built Christmas pyramids of wood and decorated them with evergreens and candles if wood was scarce. It is a widely-held belief that Martin Luther, the 16th-century Protestant reformer, first added lighted candles to a tree. Walking toward his home one winter evening, composing a sermon, he was awed by the brilliance of stars twinkling amidst evergreens. To recapture the scene for his family, he erected a tree in the main room and wired its branches with lighted candles.

Whatever your holiday celebration during the month of December happens to be, I hope that you celebrate with family and friends, and that the message of peace and joy is spread through your circle of influence.

“How did it get so late so soon? Its night before its afternoon. December is here before its June. My goodness how the time has flewn. How did it get so late so soon?”
 — Dr. Suess

Favorite Flora:

Agave americana- Century Plant- By Jon Marenfeld



This deciduous shrub, also known as Candlewood, Slimwood, Coachwhip, Vine Cactus, Flaming Sword and Jacob's Staff, is one of the easiest southwestern plants to identify. The Ocotillo, native to the Sonoran and Chihuahuan Deserts, is a large vase-shaped shrub with long cane-like, spine filled branches. It can grow up to 20 feet tall and live up to 60 years but some plants have been known to live to well over 100. When there is enough moisture, small 2 inch leaves cover the stems. When dry conditions are present the ocotillo drops its leaves relying on the chlorophyll in its stems for food production. If you look closely at the stems, you'll see green lines in the bark. From March through June dense clusters of red/orange tubular flowers grow from the end of the stem which may account for the name Ocotillo, which in Spanish means “little torch”.

The Ocotillo has been used for many things in the desert southwest from fencing, to roofing, to medicinal uses. As a living fence its spines stop people and animals from passing through. For a rustic looking ramada its canes can be used as roofing. Its flowers can be added to water for flavoring and Native Americans such as the Seri, Cahuilla, Yavapai, Pima, and Tohono O’odham eat the flowers and nectar. The Cahuilla used the protein-rich seeds to make flour while the Apache used the blossoms for making tea to relieve sore and swollen muscles.

The Ocotillo can handle full and reflected sun and, once established, requires no additional water except in the driest climates. Just be careful not to over-water it because too much water can kill the plant. The ocotillo is also easy to care for. If space is tight simply remove the unwanted stem(s). One thing to keep in mind is because it has spines it would be smart to keep it away from areas with foot traffic. The Ocotillo is typically used in xeriscaping as an accent plant and its flowers attract hummingbirds. Pair it with other native desert plants such as barrel cacti (Ferocactus sp.), Cholla and Prickly Pear (Opuntia sp.).



Photo of the Month
Ducks on the Water
 Wayne Kirch WMA, NV
 Matt Durham