

Featured Plant

Common Name: Ocotillo
Pronounced: oh-koh-TEE-yoh
Scientific Name: *Fouquieria splendens*



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Ocotillo (*Fouquieria splendens*) is a unique native desert plant with low-branching, leafy, whip like canes. Ocotillos can grow to 15 feet in height and as wide. In spring, it is topped with bright orange-red, tubular flowers providing migrating hummingbirds with much needed nourishment. In Spanish, ocotillo means little "torch." They are typically leafless most of the year, but produce many leaves after significant precipitation. During periods of drought, ocotillos shed their leaves to reduce evaporative loss and conserve plant

moisture. Ocotillos are extremely drought tolerant and an excellent accent plant for residential and commercial landscapes.

Ocotillo is not a cactus since it grows true leaves. It is a close relative of the Boojum tree (*Idria columnaris*) which is native to isolated areas of Baja California and Sonora, Mexico. Ocotillo is often found in stands consisting of many individual plants. In the past, canes have been harvested and used for fences. The canes often took root and created living fences that leaf out and bloom (do not harvest native ocotillo-they are protected by Arizona's Native Plant Law-more below).

Ocotillos are available from selected nurseries. In Arizona, landowners have the right to destroy or remove ocotillos (and other protected plants) growing on their land, but 20 to 60 days prior to the destruction of any protected native plants, landowners are required to notify the Arizona Department of Agriculture. The landowner also has the right to sell or give away any plant growing on the land. However, protected native plants may not be legally possessed, taken or transported from the growing site without a permit from the Arizona Department of Agriculture.

Transplanting of these desert plants can also be done the year around with knowledgeable care, but greatest success is achieved during March through May. Transplant to the original growing depth and, as with cacti, in their original directional orientation. The original south side of the plant, which has become more heat and sunlight-resistant, should again face the hotter southern direction. Well drained sandy or gravelly loam soils with light to moderate amounts of organic content favor root development of these desert plants.

To help prevent the newly transplanted ocotillo from falling over or blowing down in a storm, large stones may be placed over the root area (2-4 inches from the trunk). Sunny, open, unrestricted locations and those where surface water does not collect are best. Some degree of growth set-back is to be expected. Properly transplanted, however, ocotillos reestablish themselves fairly successfully. It's not necessary, nor recommended, that the tops of any cacti, agave, yucca or ocotillo plants be pruned back when transplanting.

Ocotillos are a wonderful plant if you have the proper space and soil type. If you don't have room for one, enjoy and appreciate the native ocotillo stands that exist. Also, remember to contact the Arizona Department of Agriculture, 1688 W. Adams, Phoenix, Arizona 85007, (602)364-0935, web address: agriculture.state.az.us, for specific regulations, restrictions, permits, penalties, etc., before digging and moving any cacti, agaves, ocotillos, yucca, etc.

Featured Bird

Common Name: Greater Roadrunner
Scientific Name: *Geococcyx californianus*



Dan L. Fischer

Dan L. Fischer, Author of *Early Southwest Ornithologists, 1528-1900*, University of Arizona Press

The notes that follow apply to one of the most remarkable and amusing birds readily observed in the Southwest. Commonly referred to as Roadrunner, Chaparral Cock or Ground Cuckoo, it is certainly one of our most interesting and appealing avian creatures. The Mexicans refer to the bird as paisano meaning affectionately "compatriot" or "fellow countryman." The *correo del camino*, as it also sometimes called, is analogous to roadrunner. In Arizona it occurs throughout most of the lower southern regions below the Mogollon Rim and is considered scarce elsewhere. Although found in the mid-elevations of pinyon-juniper and oak woodlands, the bird is more often observed among mesquite, creosote bush, paloverde, various cacti and grasslands that include yucca.

The Greater Roadrunner is a rather large bird, almost two feet in length, that is brownish with black streaks and possesses a very long tail. Its wingspan is only slightly less than its length. As it hurries along in search of food, its distinctive tail is raised or lowered and often swished back and forth. In addition to a large formidable decurved bill, it has a short crest which it frequently elevates. Supporting the body are long gray legs which have toes in a zygodactyl arrangement. Their common "X" impressions in powdery sand readily show that the toes are aligned in pairs; the second and third toes are in front, while the fourth and hallux, or hind toe, are behind.

The running speed (20 mi per hr) and agility of this bird were noted by early naturalists even before it was officially described. In 1828, the ship's Italian-born doctor Paolo Emilio Botta (1802-1870), on board the French trader *Le Heros* off the California coast, wrote that the "bird called charia runs very swiftly, jumping occasionally and beating its wings, which we might call flying..." He was observing its swift behavior as it frequently dashes about with occasional short flights and glides, in pursuit of insects, lizards, snakes, small rodents and young birds. On some cold winter mornings Greater Roadrunners often elevate their back and neck feathers facing the sun so as to expose their black-pigmented skin to its warming rays.

Toward the end of March nesting begins for the Greater Roadrunner as its lays three to six glossy white eggs in a rather poorly constructed twig structure in a dense scrub, tree or cactus. Unlike most birds it begins incubation immediately, whereby the clutch results in asynchronous hatching with uneven ages of unhatched, weaker or neglected siblings. The parents, if ample food is available, may double-brood. The male birds also tend and care for the young.

In the period between 1787-1803, expeditions by Spain into New Spain, on the North American continent, resulted in an unfortunate set of circumstances for many early naturalists who received little recognition for their many achievements. Among them were Spanish physician Martin de Sessé (1751-1808) and Mexican-born José Mariano Moziño (1757-1820), who recorded many plants and animals of the region. Artists of exceptional talent accompanied them and painted many of their discoveries including the Greater Roadrunner. Because of the political turmoil in Spain these findings were not published at the time and shared with the scientific world. This bird was later described by French naturalist R. P. Lesson (1794-1849) in 1829.