

Autumn brings changes in habits of desert plants, creatures

by Marguerite Lantham

Autumn brings a subtle change to the desert. A muted look that is resistful to the eye. In the desert each tree and shrub has its own time of rest and growth. Because mesquite, catclaw, palo verde and ironwood dominate the desert landscape, any change in their foliage can alter the overall look of the desert. One such change is the notable thinning of foliage.

Mesquite leaves do not make a showy splash of color but turn yellow a sparse few at a time. I doubt that anyone has noticed a falling mesquite leaf. As the dry spell continues and the leaves disappear, the black trunk and branches will make interesting line drawings against the green of palo verde. The thick tangles of mistletoe are becoming more visi-

ble on their branches, looking much like the nests of some giant bird.

Ironwood and catclaw remain thick foliaged, although some thinning is noticeable. A few

we are having. The name, palo verde means "green pole" in Spanish. The stems and trunk bear chlorophyll, and are able to manufacture food in the absence of leaves. Even without leaves,

They, along with the prickly pear, are plumping out.

In the wet washes, fall is more spectacular. The cottonwoods are and alder make a splash of yellow, with a conspicuous show of dropping their leaves. After the sycamores shed their yellow cloak, the white bark plays a new pattern on the landscape. Poison ivy makes a showy red — but beware! The desert willows, too, will soon be bare-branched.

The jojoba plants had a fair-to-poor crop of beans this year. The pods have, for the most part, split open. Most of the acorn-like-seeds have been eaten by birds and rodents, but a few can still be found. If you like strong coffee and dark chocolate, the flavor is pleasing. I have become quite addicted to them.

Desert broom must be mentioned, because it is so prevalent. Its bright-green, upside-down broom-look will soon be topped by a profusion of yellow-white blooms. The buds are now in the making. It will bloom from October to February.

Rabbitbush is also a fall bloomer. Its mass of yellow flowers can be seen along roadsides and in dry washes. They have a strong smell, and are best viewed from a distance.

One cannot help but notice how clean-looking the desert floor has become. It has a manicured look, as though some zealous gardener has clipped and raked beneath each tree and shrub. All leaves, twigs and seeds have been cleaned away by hungry little mouths and beaks,

either for food or nesting material. The gleaners of the desert have been busy. The summer rains have helped wash it clean.

Fall is a time for walking in the desert — looking, listening and meditating. We in the Foothills are so fortunate to be a part of the desert's tranquility and peace.