

Stunning Thanksgiving Tablescape Ideas + 5 Dazzling Dream Homes + Architectural Marvels at Los Milics Vineyards

PHOENIX

HOME+GARDEN



HOME
OF
THE YEAR

Beauty and the

B L O O M



Bougainvillea



Miniature Saguaro



Eve's Needle Cactus



Arbol Peppers

High-tech methods and old-fashioned artistry meet in a Phoenix photographer's captivating horticultural prints.

BY PAULA M. BODAH PHOTOGRAPHY BY GEORGE GRUEL

What George Gruel chooses to photograph is simple. A single, striking bird-of-paradise flower, a delicate sprig of yellow-blossomed brittle bush, a handful of glossy red chili peppers, all popping against a midnight-black background. Yet, the resulting images defy this simplicity, revealing a complexity, detail and



Dwarf Chin Cactus

textured richness that prompts uncertainty, blurring the lines between a photograph, an oil painting and the tangible reality itself.

Gruel had already had a long career as a graphic artist and photographer when he met his wife, Janet Lennox Moyer, in 2004. Moyer, an internationally renowned landscape lighting designer, had a nearly 6-acre garden-studded property in Troy, New York, that she used as a laboratory for her work. Gruel found the gardens enchanting and began photographing them, one bloom at a time. “When you start really looking at flowers, it’s mind-boggling,” he says.

The couple settled in Phoenix eight years ago. Here, in their two-acre yard and the surrounding Arizona landscape, Gruel has found a whole new population of flora to explore and photograph, many of which are showcased in his 2023 book “Horticultural Portraits.”

The trajectory of his life—both artistically and personally—may best be summed up with his own words: “The way I live is by thinking, ‘leap, and the net will appear,’” he says.

That philosophy has served him well since 1970 when, during his third year studying photography at the Art School of the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts (now the College of Creative Studies), he and a couple of friends drove out to San Francisco. “I got there and I never went back for my fourth year,” he recalls. “San Francisco was mecca to me. The creative energy was just amazing.”

In those first heady months on the West Coast, Gruel found himself hanging out with future icons of the San Francisco rock scene. He hauled equipment for New Riders of the Purple Sage, helped the Grateful Dead’s Bob Weir with the wiring in his home studio, then headed to Europe as a roadie for singer Valerie Carter, who was opening for the Eagles.

Gruel carried his camera everywhere, documenting what he saw. “Looking back, I wish I’d taken more pictures,” he confesses. “Sometimes I was too high to do anything.”

Over the years, he shot for several bands, documenting tours in Europe and the U.S. and taking pictures that ended up on album covers.

Gruel was working backstage for Warren Zevon in 1978 when, he remembers, “Warren came in one day and asked me if I wanted a job as his aide-de-camp.” That was the beginning of a long, deep friendship that



Moringa Tree

included acting as Zevon’s road manager, photographer and general confidante. Among Gruel’s album credits, in fact, is the cover of Zevon’s 1980 album “Bad Luck Streak in Dancing School.” In 2013, he published “Lawyers Guns & Photos,” a memoir in words and pictures of his years with Zevon. “We were joined at the brain, we were so much alike,” he says. “It was quite an adventure.”

Photographing plants and flowers is probably more conducive to life expectancy than hanging out with rock stars, but Gruel finds it equally captivating. For many of his photos, he sets a botanical specimen against black seamless paper and homes in close with his lens. He then uploads the images to his computer and paints on them with a digitizing pen, adding detail

“George’s work is a contemporary twist on the old-fashioned botanical print,” says Darlene Richert, who shows Gruel’s work in her Scottsdale shop, Avery Lane.



Mexican Bird of Paradise

and balancing light and dark. "I'll spend six or eight hours noodling each one until it looks like what I see," he says. "The camera can't see what your mind can."

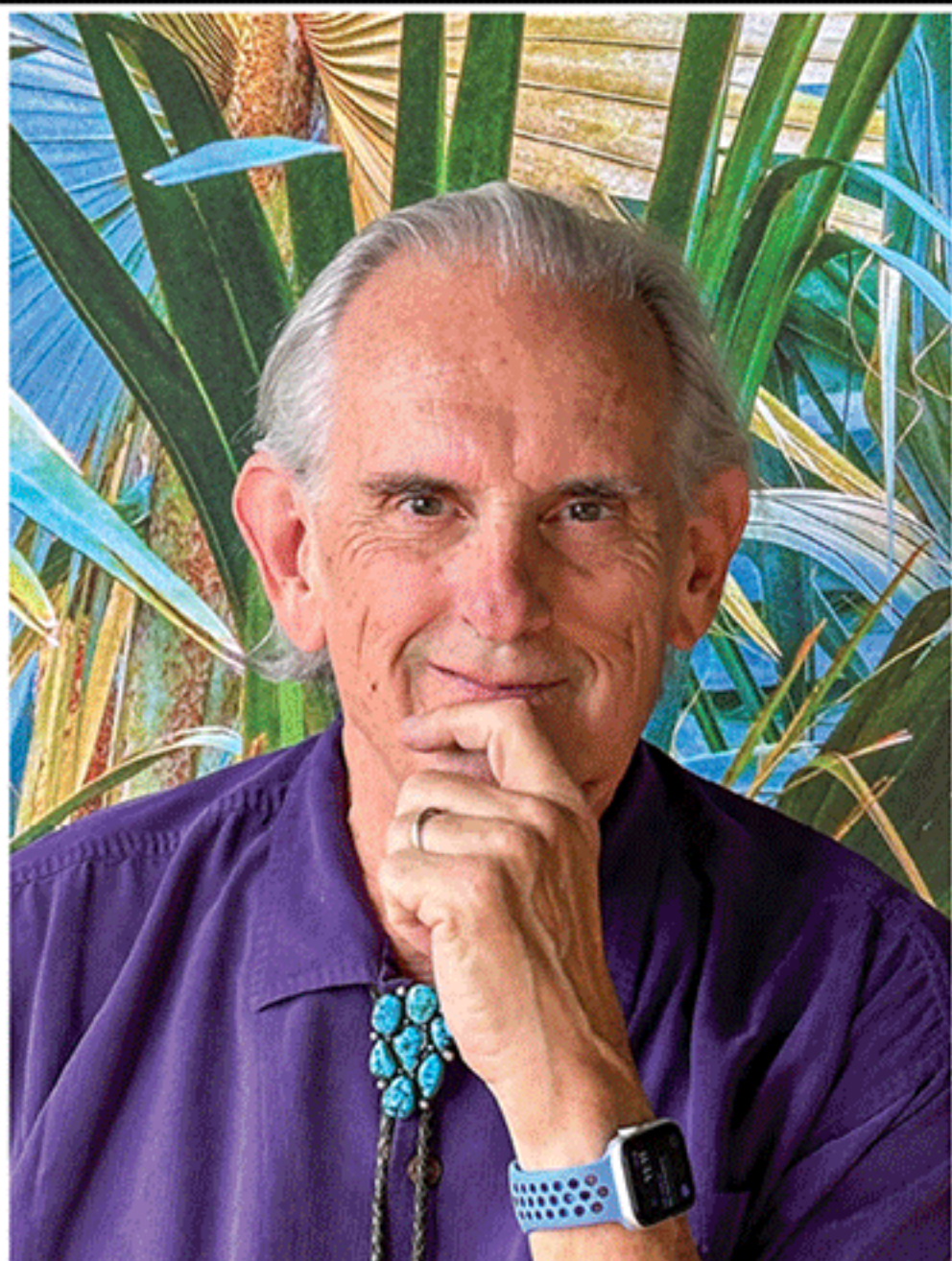
For smaller prints, he uses photographic paper, but he more typically creates a large-scale version on a 2-by-3-foot canvas. "The canvas makes the images pop," he explains.

The results are mesmerizing. "George's work changes and lights up the energy of a room," says Mary Zaranto, a writer and musician who connected with Gruel in a doctor's waiting room and formed a fast friendship. "He understands and captures the way the divine pours through nature."

Another friend and fan, realtor and designer Mary Kincaid introduced Gruel to Darlene Richert, owner of the Scottsdale consignment shop Avery Lane, where his pictures now hang. "His photos are otherworldly," Kincaid says.

What's next for the artist? More botanicals. "There's a million more flowers to do," he says. "I want people to get out and look at nature more. I hope that I can get at least one person to stop and look at a flower."

For more information, see Sources.



George Gruel in front of one of his artworks, "Parrot Palm"



Goat's Horn Cactus



Brittlebush