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tucson

MEET OUR *makers*

In 2025, Tucson is celebrating its 250th anniversary. It’s a history that has been influenced by many cultures, including the Tohono O’odham, Spanish and Mexicans. In this month’s edition of Meet Our Makers, you’ll hear from Jesús Manuel García, one of Tucson’s leading ethnobotanists, who will share how Tucson’s agricultural past could help to lay the framework for its future, as challenges such as climate change and ongoing water shortages persist. Keep reading to learn about Jesús or click on the What's New link below for the latest and greatest media updates from Tucson.

What's New in Tucson

Photo taken by Dena Cowen

Meet Jesús Manuel García

If there is a person who best embodies the borderlands, it is (arguably) Jesús Manuel García.

He is bicultural in the truest sense of the word, a man who traverses the U.S., Mexico border at regular intervals to visit his family in his hometown, the city of Magdalena de Kino, Sonora (where Spanish Missionary Father Eusebio Kino's remains are interred) before returning to his home of 30+ years, Tucson.

Jesús' roots are as humble as he is. He spent his younger years living and working the land at his rural family farm, a place he recalls having fraught feelings about as a child. The reason, he says, is because he lamented having parents who didn't have a formal education and dreamed of learning English and one day moving to the United States.

Yet, now, as an educated, bilingual, dual citizen, when he reflects on his past, it is with gratitude, pride and even something more, perhaps reverence?

"As part of my job with the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, I travel to Sonora and Baja California quite often, and one my greatest pleasures is visiting the old ranches and communities in that region where people have been living the past 300 years, isolated from the outside world. To me, there's nothing compared to that," Jesús said. "That's the lifestyle my parents had, and me to a certain extent, as a child. Their lives are not easy, they are difficult, but the traditions are so rich."

Today, Jesús is one of Tucson's foremost ethnobotanists. While he works full-time as a Cultural Conservation Research Associate for the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, he is involved with countless non-profits.

Much like in his youth, Jesús' adult life has been consumed by Mother Nature – finding and propagating plants that have lived and grown in the Sonoran Desert for hundreds, and in many cases, thousands, of years, and determining the ongoing role they have and will continue to play amongst humans.

Jesús' work can be found at Tumacácori National Historical Park, the initial site of the Kino Heritage Fruit Trees Project, of which Jesús is the Director. In 2007, the descendants of quince, fig, pear, pomegranate, and apricot trees brought to Tucson by Spanish missionaries in the late 1600s, were planted at the National Historic Site.

The seeds for the Kino Heritage Fruit Trees Project were historically derived from Mexico, where fruit trees are still commonplace in backyards, serving both as a source of food and a canopy of shade. Jesús also collected cuttings and seeds from rural parts of Southern Arizona and some of Tucson's oldest homes.

The missionary fruit trees distinguish themselves from the ones found ubiquitously in supermarkets in the United States in texture, look and taste. For instance, the arils

within an heirloom pomegranate of Spanish origins are white, not red, and they do not have the tartness associated with the “Wonderful” brand pomegranate from California.

Another example is quince: “They can simply be plucked off the tree and eaten, without any preparation,” Jesús said.

Photo taken by Dena Cowen

These heirloom trees can also be found at Mission Garden, a living ethnobotanical museum that demonstrates how various cultures, such as Native American, Spanish, Mexicans, Chinese, and others, have contributed to Tucson’s more than 4,000-year agricultural history. Jesús sits on the Board of the garden, located at the base of A-Mountain and in the same footprint as one historically cultivated by Tucson’s first inhabitants, the Tohono O’odham and their ancestors.

During our conversation, Jesús points out that agriculture was prominent throughout the Tucson valley until recently. The Native peoples’ complex irrigation system channeled water from the Santa Cruz River to a wide variety of crops, including corn, tobacco, cotton, squash and tepary beans. Upon the arrival of Spanish missionaries, wheat and the aforementioned fruit trees were also grown.

“If you look at images of the Mission Garden from the late 1800s from atop A-Mountain, you can see that the entire Santa Cruz Valley is filled with a tapestry of small-scale family agriculture,” Jesús said.

The agricultural reality of present-day Tucson sharply contrasts with the past. The Santa Cruz River has been largely depleted through overuse and climate aridification.

As a result, Tucson's reliance on local agriculture has dramatically waned and much of what is consumed is imported from elsewhere.

Jesús aims to change that. What began as a means of satiating his curiosity about plants and their origins has transformed into the lifelong pursuit of determining more sustainable agricultural methods in the Southwest. Jesús looks to the distant past, and his roots in rural Sonora, Mexico, for many of the answers.

As a child growing up on a small-scale farm and ranch, Jesús said his family grew or made nearly everything that they consumed. Though the lifestyle was challenging, in hindsight, he says it was far more sustainable than today's industrial agricultural practices.

"Trying to diversify, and promote small-scale agriculture is nothing new – this is something that is still a way of life in Mexico. We are just trying to revive, practice and implement old fashion and traditional methods of agriculture that don't exist in the U.S. anymore. It's almost like starting from scratch," Jesús said. "When we have a majority of Anglo-European culture that has no connection to or palate for Mediterranean crops and the traditional Native foods that are a part of the cultures of the Sonoran Desert region, it's an uphill battle."

Photo taken by Dena Cowen

In recent months, García has joined a multi-agency team called the Arizona Alliance for Climate-Smart Foods, a grant funded by the United States Department of Agriculture.

The group's goal is to promote local farming and determine more ecological and sustainable ways to farm.

According to the group's website, "one-fifth of Arizona's Water Budget for crop irrigation … has been lost for use in food production due to water rationing, drought, and the effects of a warming and drying climate." Water projections for the future are even more bleak.

The group aims to create an agricultural blueprint for Arizona that considers changing conditions, and incorporating the use of climate-smart practices, such as agrivoltaics, alley cropping and reduced or no-till agriculture. However, Jesús says none of the planting mechanisms will be successful unless crops that are well-suited for the Sonoran Desert are planted.

"Climate Smart Crops is a buzzword right now … It means crops that are adapted to their local environments, and in our case, adapted to the arid conditions, adapted to the soils, adapted to the rainfall, adapted to the culture. We are certainly not doing that right now in Arizona. Everything we grow, we are using so much water, and the things we are producing don't stay here," Jesús said. "As part of this grant and my previous work with Mission Garden, we are starting to promote and plant crops that have been part of this culture, for hundreds, if not thousands of years. Right now, we are growing succulents, cactus and legumes – plants that have long been grown and cultivated by Native Americans and then Hispanic Americans."

The process is slow, but Jesús remains confident that change is afoot. Anglo-Americans are gaining exposure to the foods that Jesús grew up eating through promotion, education and tastings at places like Mission Garden and the hundreds of Mexican restaurants found throughout the city.

The next step, Jesús says, is determining which prickly pear, agave, and legume species have the best farming potential, a question the grant hopes to answer as it experiments with a dozen promising varieties. The final hurdle is a formidable one that is rife with sociopolitical challenges - getting local farmers and the public-at-large to buy in.

"I can guarantee you that prickly pear cactus dishes served at Mexican restaurants in the Tucson area were not grown locally. They were likely brought from Mexico," Jesús said. "Imagine if most Mexican restaurants in Tucson could serve and promote for two or three months of the year: 'these items on the menu have prickly pear cactus, and they have been grown locally.' It would be awesome. If we could get farmers and consumers who live within 50 miles, even 100 miles of Tucson, to embrace this idea … that would be the beginning of a paradigm change."

If you're interested in learning more about Jesús story, we'd recommend watching this documentary.

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