

THINKING OUTSIDE THE CORRAL

ANOTHER WAY TO EARN. BY RIC FROST

It's no big news that a major problem facing ranchers is staying economically viable in the face of change. Too often I've encountered operations that are economically strained and too far from town for a second supporting income. Many are myopically focused on just maintaining their cattle operation because "that's what my daddy did and what his daddy did."

When folks visit with me about how they can increase their ranch income in a depressed price-taking market, I ask them

first to assess all their natural resource chattels (owned assets) not related to cattle production, to see what other marketable items may be under the landowner's control. This inventory covers a wide range including herbs, plants, trees, and rocks. The urban markets driving the demands for these resources are holistic medicine, organic foods, landscaping, nurseries, lumber, construction, and museums. One of these efforts to "think outside the corral" has been working, helping ranchers remain in business while aiding city peo-

ple with their needs.

In recent years water demands in growing urban areas of western states have forced strict water-use regulations for landscapes. Cities from Las Vegas to El Paso have imposed strong economic sanctions for excessive water use. Home and garden magazines are packed with articles and pictures promoting water-efficient landscapes in an effort to create in homeowners a desire to experience and enjoy striking desert-landscaped homes. This has created a huge demand for desert and drought-tolerant plants.

So in one region we have an invasion (or excess population) of drought-tolerant plants and in another region, a demand for (or lack of) drought-tolerant plants. Enter Mike Mosman of Cactus Unlimited.

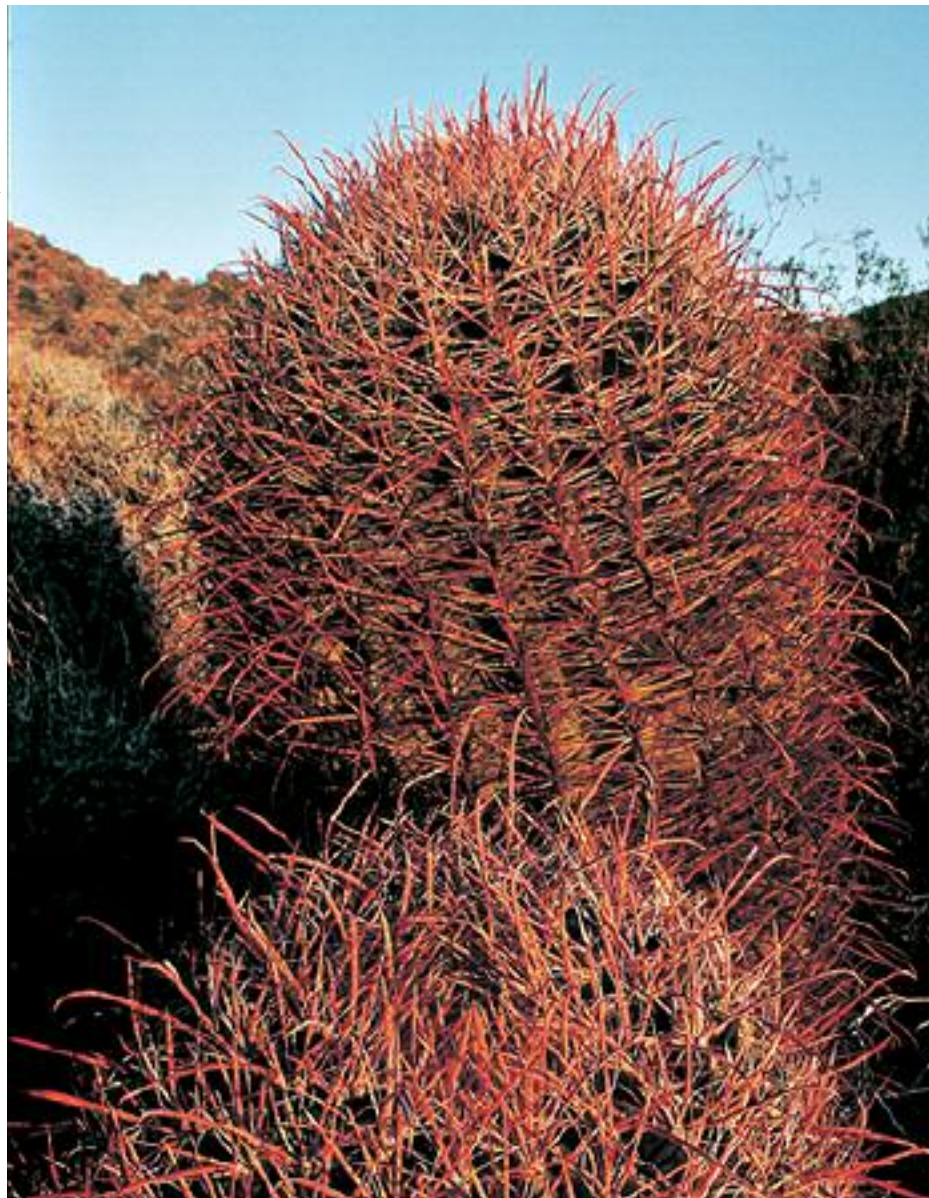
For years Mike has slowly and carefully developed a business harvesting cactus and other desert plants from ranches in West Texas for sale to urban nurseries and landscapers. He works with various ranch managers to determine which areas need restoration where an overpopulation of invasive cacti, yucca and other desert plants has occurred. He then implements a strategic and methodical thinning plan, which selectively removes some live plants and leaves the landscape with a uniform population density to the benefit of both the immediate environment and long-term ranch-management goals.

Mike pays the ranch for all plants he harvests. So instead of incurring the expense of having the invasive plants removed, the rancher gets paid to have the invasive plants thinned to a manageable level. It's a win-win situation for everyone involved.

Mike and I recently drove to a ranch in West Texas where we viewed some of his ear-

There are many valuable resources on ranches that are not related to cattle production. It's often a surprise to find many other marketable items may be under a landowner's control.
LEFT: Barrel Cactus. RIGHT: Chain-fruit cholla.

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liest efforts to restore ranch lands through the selective harvesting of desert plants. Enough time has passed so it's easy to see the results of his endeavor. The area he thinned almost a decade ago is immediately adjacent to an invaded undisturbed area that has yet to be thinned. This allows an impressive before-and-after, side-by-side comparison (see photos at right).

"Plant density balance and minimal impact to the land is what we strive for," Mike says. "We also leave behind plants of various ages for future harvests like you would with timber stands in the forests. We always fill in any holes we create. The surrounding grass eventually fills in the area. We leave virtually no footprint."

Cactus Unlimited is a licensed and regulated business. "We constantly have to fill out all kinds of paperwork on the origin of the plants and we have to deal with each state's Department of Agriculture's laws and regulatory permit process with permit fees. For example, when we haul a trailer load of plants to Arizona, initially there are fees paid and originating permit paperwork sent to the state of Texas Department of Agriculture for each shipment. When we reach the Arizona border, there is another layer of paperwork we have to fill out and more fees to pay on that same shipment.

"On top of that, we also know which plants are allowed for collection and trade and which are restricted from commercial considerations due to the ESA [Endangered Species Act]. We don't collect on any government lands, strictly on private property. We are a legitimate, licensed operation and always under the scrutiny of some agency."

When asked how much compensation a ranch owner averages for the harvest of the plants, Mike states: "It really depends on what the market is demanding at the time. At the end of the month, it could be a few hundred dollars or it could be more than a few thousand dollars. Most ranches where I've harvested plants are at least able to make their monthly land payment from what I collect off their property. But it's really the market demand that determines which plants are harvested, not what the ranch has to offer. So in some regards, this business isn't as consistent as some would like."

Getting folks to think outside the corral has numerous beneficial outcomes including: an economically enhanced and diversified ranch operation; rangeland and habitat improvements without cost to the ranch; small business entrepreneurial development

PHOTOS © RIC FROST



from the rural wholesale supplier to the urban landscaper and nursery retailer; meeting urban demands for water-efficient landscape plants; and decreasing overall water demands on urban systems.

Additionally, the flora display from these desert transplants transforms any yard into a spectacular array of springtime and summer colors. From neon reds to glowing oranges and electrified purples, desert flowers demonstrate a palate of colors no earthly artist has ever been able to duplicate. It is a special sight to see an entire neighborhood blooming and people appreciating this natural beauty from the desert.

One final note. If you are in a position to collect and sell plants, you need to contact your state's Department of Agriculture and find out what the regulations and registration

requirements are, especially which land areas allow for collection. For the most part, collection from private lands is allowed without restrictions, but not all government-controlled lands are open for plant harvest. You also need to find out which plant species are protected—either with a state-listed protection (such as a state flower), or a threatened or endangered listing by government agencies implementing the Endangered Species Act. While permits and all the paperwork required are relatively inexpensive, the fines and penalties for collecting and selling plants without permits are not. ■

Ric Frost is a policy analyst and natural resource economic consultant in New Mexico. Mike Mosman can be reached at <www.cactusunlimited.net>.





BOTH PAGES, TOP: The left side of the road has been harvested and is healthier than the right side of the road, which hasn't been touched. In some regions there can be an invasion (or excess population) of drought-tolerant plants and in another region a demand for (or lack of) drought-tolerant plants. Enter Mike Mosman of Cactus Unlimited. For years Mike has slowly and carefully developed a business harvesting cactus and other desert plants from ranches in West Texas for sale to urban nurseries and landscapers. He helps ranchers to determine which areas need restoration where an overpopulation of invasive cacti, yucca (BELOW LEFT) and other desert plants has occurred. He then implements a strategic and methodical thinning plan, which selectively removes some live plants and leaves the landscape with a uniform population density to the benefit of both the immediate environment and long-term ranch-management goals.

BELOW: Prickly pear cactus.



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