

October Succulent of the Month

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Bursera microphylla



Bursera microphylla is a small tree / large shrub that grows mainly in the Sonoran Desert of Northwestern Mexico. Of the many species of *Bursera* found in Mexico, *B. microphylla* is the only one that grows in the United States. It can be found in the lower deserts of Southern California and Arizona. Its natural range is limited by freezing temperatures so it can only be seen in favorable microclimates in sheltered locations from Phoenix southward. The substrate of the rocky slopes it grows on is volcanic or granite based.

It has a swollen trunk with low twisted branches that are red tipped. As the name suggest-- it has tiny leaves that grow opposite of each other. It's commonly called Elephant Trees because of the caudiciform or fat stem at ground level. The bark is attractive as it will peel off in a coppery tone and the trunk can photosynthesize much like the Ocotillo does as the small leaves

will fall of when in drought conditions.

This plant is in the frankincense family and has had many uses by native peoples. The sap can be burned as an incense and the medicinal use was said to treat several types of illness from headaches to arthritis to soft tissue pain.

In cultivation here in Houston, the *Bursera microphylla* should always be considered a container plant. It is very tolerant of our hot summers and requires little care besides being protected from freezing temps. It is not often seen in the plant trade but is found now and then through localized special growers. I have had good luck with it but have failed-- so far-- when trying to get stem cuttings to root. Also-- I have seen this plant one time in habitat. It was about halfway up the south side of South Mountain in Phoenix and is shown in a couple of pics with this article.

