Building towards forever: 
the creation of D:F Ranch, 
a large desert garden 
in a wild place

People regularly ask me, “How did you get into cactus and other plants?” I always tell them that I don’t really know where the passion for them came from, but that I was possessed of it at a young age. I am told that by the age of four or five, I was asking my parents about what each flower was on hikes in the foothills of Boulder, Colorado where I spent my first 30 years of life. By about age 8 or 9, I knew where to find the cactus species on the dry prairies and hillsides and had intuitively picked up that Opuntias made great cuttings that could readily root when replanted in a little wooden planter box that my father constructed for me at my request out of plywood.

By about age 12 I was fully into understanding habitats, ecology, and keen observation of the natural world and the relationships between both living and abiotic elements of the ecosystem. I remember observing that the largest clumps of Coryphantha vivipara and C. missouriensis I knew of lived primarily upon one dry hillside, especially the northeastern and western slopes just below the summit. The C. vivipara were the least common but had the largest stems rising about 6 inches (15 cm) tall as well as the showiest flowers, a flashy hot pink that shocked my senses because it was utterly unexpected. The C. missouriensis were barely above the ground, sometimes forming mats of 15 to 20 stems or more, and bloomed in what seemed to be a subtle rainbow of pinkish yellow and peachy tones. I noticed that Echinocereus viridiflorus were the earliest of all cacti to bloom, and that about half of the flowers had a noticeable lemon scent while the other half were odorless. I also noticed that many of my friends to whom I pointed out this scenting discrepancy were unable to smell anything whatsoever, even on plants that were clearly fragrant to me. (A thing which still holds true – a fair number of people cannot smell the flowers of E. viridiflorus at all, although many can, or at least the ones that have fragrance in the first place…).

These three small globular cacti, plus three species of prickly pear (Opuntia fragilis, O. macrorhiza, and O. polyacantha) and one yucca (Yucca glauca) all grew upon this modest hillside rising above the banks of Dry Creek, which flowed through farmland and prairie east of Boulder a short distance from my house. In addition to the cacti and the lone yucca, there were other hazardous plants – prickly poppies (Argemone pleiacantha) and needle-and-thread grass (aka “speargrass”, Hesperostipa comata, which has sharp awns that stick into clothing and skin when thrown.) Lacking an official name, I gave it one: Prickly Hill. In summertime, we had to navigate across Prickly Hill in our flip-flops while carrying innertubes to float down the creek. The worst plants were the aptly-named Opuntia fragilis, which hid in the grasses and would shed sharp ovoid joints into your feet and ankles and could puncture your tubes if you set them down to take the offending, painful Opuntia joints out of your person. I quickly assumed the role of guide for the neighborhood kids, teaching them how to spot the spiny clumps of all cacti amidst the foot-tall stands of invasive cheatgrass and fringed sage. We all learned to pick our way past these natural hazards to safely enter the waterway and float back home.

Prickly Hill was no one’s favorite place, other than mine. What other kids considered a minus, I considered a plus – prickly plants were awesome and amazing, and why couldn’t they see that? I grew to love this small hill and its unfriendly denizens. Therefore you can imagine my distress when one year, probably when I was about 13 or 14 years old, the rancher who owned Prickly Hill decided to stock a large number of cattle upon it. The bovine onslaught quickly reduced everything on the hillside to an overgrazed barren wasteland within a few months, as heavy hooves stomped the cacti into mush, and even the...