By Kylee Baumle

A couple of weekends ago, I traveled to Tucson, Ariz. for a garden writers conference. This is held at a different location every year and when it was announced last year that it would be held in the southwest, I knew immediately that I wanted to go. I'd never been there and gardening in Arizona couldn't be further from the experience of gardening in Ohio.

As the airplane flew in over Tucson, of course I noticed the mountains. Being from the flat plains, those mountains are a novelty and a wonder. (They also create turbulence for the airplane. Ugh.) But the next thing I noticed was the color. Everything was brown. It wasn't the brown we experience when going through a drought or the brown of winter. It was a golden color, dotted here and there with oases of blue-green.

Once on the ground, my first thought was, "Dorothy, you aren't in Kansas anymore." The atmosphere was drier, the sky was a brilliant blue, and there was a smell to the air that I couldn't quite put my finger on. As I traveled around the area for the next couple of days, herbal fragrances would subtly come and go.

If plants want to survive in the Sonoran Desert, they have to adapt to not only the intense sun and heat during the day, but the drastic coolness that can come at night. Low levels of rain present their own issues. As you can guess, succulents are survivors here, storing moisture within their leaves and other parts, for use when nature doesn't provide it at the time it's needed. Cacti, agaves, and aloes are all at home in the desert and grow as wild along roadsides as chicory does in Ohio.

Before I got one mile away from the airport, a roadrunner ran across the path of my rental car. It didn't go "beep beep" and no anvil fell on my car, but it did make me shriek with excitement because I'd never seen one in real life before. It was as if my childhood cartoons had come to life.

I saw many a cactus wren, too. It's Arizona's state bird and one was building a nest in a saguaro cactus in front of the hotel. I was walking by and it kept flitting in front of me, so I stopped and watched, as it brought bits and pieces to the new nest. They build them sideways, to protect their eggs and hatchlings from the intense desert sun. It's a beautiful bird and I saw many of them while I was there.

It became apparent why those in the southwest like to use colors such as turquoise and red in their homes and other parts of their habitat. All that brown demands that you do something to brighten things up. With the exception of the brilliant green bark of the Palo Verde trees, even the plants aren't really a true green; they're what are known in the gardening world as "glaucous." The leaves have more of a blue hue than green and that's a protective mechanism against the sun, too.

Flowers bloom brightly in shades of red, orange and yellow, and that attracts the hummingbirds, which I noticed in abundance. Unlike us here in the eastern part of the country, who only get to enjoy the ruby-throated hummingbirds, the southwest is home to 17 different species of them.

It was nice to visit a place that I called the "anti-Ohio," and the beauty of the mountains and the vastly different vegetation was lovely to see. But there truly is no place like home. The feel of green grass on my bare feet is not something I will take for granted ever again.

Read more at Kylee's blog, Our Little Acre, at www.ourlittleacre.com and on Facebook at www.facebook.com/OurLittleAcre. Contact her at PauldingProgressGardener@gmail.com.