

Saguaro Cactus

The saguaro (pronounced suh-WAR-oh) cactus can grow up to forty feet tall, making it the largest cactus in North America. It is sometimes called the “sentinel of the Southwest” because of how it resembles a giant standing person. It has a thick, straight stalk with branches or “arms” growing off it that bend upwards, as if they had elbows.

The only place where the saguaro grows is the Sonoran Desert, which spreads across much of Arizona and Mexico plus the southern edge of California. The reason it can flourish in such hot, dry weather is that it is mostly a vessel for storing water. A full-grown, saturated saguaro can weigh almost 5,000 pounds! If the temperature is too low or the elevation is too high, saguaros cannot grow.

Saguaros have roots underground that grow outward rather than downward. A cactus with a height of twenty feet, for example, might have roots that are only a few inches deep, but they radiate out from the plant twenty feet in every direction. The heavy cactus is able to stand up straight and tall for years on end because of “ribs” that run inside it; made of a wood-like substance, they act like a skeleton. Native Americans used these ribs for building because they were as strong as wood. The ribs also made good splints to support broken bones. Like most cacti, saguaro have sharp spines that can grow up to three inches long. Native tribes used these spines as needles for tattooing and sewing. The oldest spines are found at the base of the cactus.

Two months of the year, in May and June, the saguaro first grows white blossoms, followed by fruits that are bright red and full of small black seeds. The cacti can live up to two hundred years, growing at a slow rate of one or two inches annually. Throughout that time, they support life for regional animals. Bats, other mammals, and birds eat the fruit or feed on the nectar, and small birds such as orioles and finches often carve out holes or “boots” in the main stalk or arms of the cactus, filling them with nests made of sticks. When the cacti die, they take on a dry, woody quality. The nesting boots form bowls, which were once used by Native Americans to carry water.

The saguaro traditionally provided food for Native tribes in Arizona. They ate the fruit fresh when it was in season and dried it for use in the winter months. This was especially important for a people called the Tohono O'odlam, who depended so heavily on the saguaro that they designed their calendar based on when it was harvested. They made jam by mashing the fruit and enjoyed an alcoholic drink made of its fermented juice. They dried the seeds in the sun and then stored them to use in winter as meal for cakes and breads. The Pima people also used saguaros in similar ways.

Although saguaros are present in a wide region, the best place to see them is Saguaro National Park, just outside the city of Tucson, Arizona, in the Rincon Mountains. Visitors can walk among the towering saguaro plants, which are surrounded by other regional flora such as barrel cacti, chollas, and prickly pears.