

Venerable saguaros now in full bloom

Saguaro are now in full bloom.

Justly proud of the cactus that has made their state known world-wide, Arizonans have made the bloom their state flower, named streets, schools and parks after it and use its silhouette as a symbol.

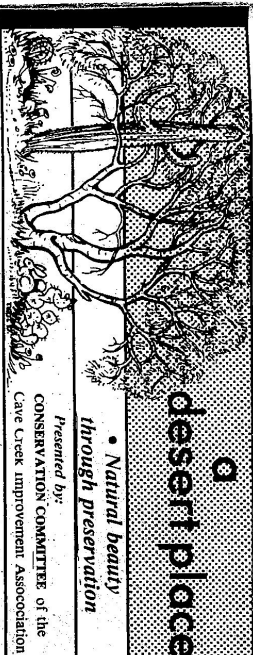
The saguaro was given its name by the early Spanish explorers. The largest cactus in the United States, it grows only in the Sonoran desert. It grows slowly — adding arms (as many as 15 or 20) during its lifetime.

It has to be from 80 to 100 years old before arms begin to grow. It attains a height of 9 to 50 feet and produces first blooms at 60 to 80 years of age.

Blooms appear first as green nodules on the tip and below the main trunk and on each arm. As the flowers open, they form a crown of white, waxy blossoms with gold centers. Each bloom opens at night and lasts until mid-day or longer, depending on an overcast. The flowers are pollinated by feeding birds, bats and insects.

A mature saguaro may produce 200 flowers, with the peak bloom during the last week in May. However, this year everything is blooming about three weeks ahead of schedule. Later in July they seem to bloom again with red blossoms, but this is the ripening fruit splitting open to expose red pulp.

The black seeds fall to the



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desert place

• Natural beauty
through preservation

ground by the thousands, where they are devoured by birds, rodents and harvester ants. The fortunate seed to survive must have a nurse plant, such as a palo verde or mesquite, to provide shelter from the cold and the burning rays of the sun. Even after sprouting, few escape the hungry mouths that feed upon them.

The saguaro has a shallow root system spread over a wide expanse to catch the rainwater. The stored water swells the cactus, forming the vertical ridges extending the length of the plant. Strong winds during the rainy season often topple mature giants whose shallow roots must support tons of swaying plant material. What has taken hundreds of years to grow, quickly is decomposed by bacterial rot in a few short months.

All that remains is a woody, long-ribbed skeleton. This wood has been made into bird cages, umbrella stands and corals. But before dashing out to prepare a novel item, one should be advised that this wood is saturated with mineral crystals which will soon dull a saw blade or ax.

The holes seen on many saguaros are drilled there by woodpeckers looking for insects. The woodpeckers also use the holes for nesting sites. A hole abandoned by a woodpecker might make a nice home for the elf owl and other birds.

Before the arrival of the supermarket, the fruit of the saguaro was once a main food item for the Papago and Pima Indians. They made ceremonial wine, syrup, jam, chicken feed, seed flour, oil and snack foods. They harvested the fruit with long poles with hooks on the end.

It has been told the Indians could survive during drought by sucking the moist pulp of the saguaro. Don't ever depend upon it. The pulp is bitter, has little moisture and may make one very ill.

Not everyone respects and admires the saguaro. They have been cut, chopped, shot at, hit with stones and cut down with

chain saws. But the saguaro's most deadly enemy is progress. Transplanting can be done with care. Much time and labor is involved, and many saguaros are too large to transplant. An ecological balance is needed for propagation to be successful. The future of the saguaro is in question with regard to the expansion and population growth of developing urban areas.
