

# Be informed on trees of the desert

by Helen Fancher

Can you identify the common desert trees in our area?

Most of us come from other parts of the country where all vegetation is vastly different from that which grows naturally in the desert. The most significant factor in this difference is the way desert trees are adapted to make efficient use of the limited water supply available to them.

The most easily recognized local tree is the palo verde. Palo verde means green pole in Spanish, and all species fulfill this description. It is the green trunk and branches that distinguish these trees from all others.

The two common varieties here are the yellow, or foothills palo verde, and the blue palo verde. The first is a yellowish green, and the second a blue green.

The foothills palo verde is a many-branched tree and grows up to about 15 feet in height. The flowers are a creamy yellow with one white petal on each.

The blue palo verde is a larger, fuller tree and may grow to as much as 20 feet in height. This tree is more likely to be found in the valleys and along washes, rather than on the hills. Its flowers are a brighter yellow, and one petal may have a few red spots.

During palo verde blooming season in a good year, the foothills are covered with a haze of yellow gold. Those of you who leave in summer would find it well worth your while to wait until late April to experience this display.

Another common tree here is the desert ironwood. Its trunk

and branches are gray and scaly. The leaves are dark bluish-green, making it stand out among the desert trees.

The ironwood are not deciduous, so we have their green color throughout the year. They grow to about 30 feet tall and are usually quite full. The flowers are lavender to purple pea flowers, which appear in small clusters.

Ironwood is an extremely dense wood. If you find a small piece, try floating it. This is



One other tree worth mentioning is the unusual crucifixion thorn. All desert trees are thorny, but this one seems to be made of a multiplicity of thorns, nearly all branches end in a thorn.

The stems are dark green, stiff and tangles. The tree grows from 6 to 18 feet tall. Leaves are small and scale-like, soon dropping off so that trees appear leafless.

There are small, inconspicuous flowers in spring which produce a

## a desert place

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always an interesting experiment for guests.

If you have trouble distinguishing an ironwood from a mesquite tree, note that the mesquite bark is much darker and furrowed. Young branches of mesquite, however, can be quite smooth and lighter in color. It may also grow to about 30 feet and has a broad spread.

At this time of year, the leaves are just beginning to come forth. In the hot summer months, they provide more shade than most desert trees. They are sometimes considered a nuisance to cattle ranchers because of the amount of water they use. The roots may penetrate to 60 feet to reach water.

In rainy, wet seasons, both the ironwood and mesquite trees store up an excess of food that will carry them through several dry seasons.

woody capsule containing a few seeds. These pods remain on the tree until the next spring and are a distinguishing feature.

All of the above trees are labeled and can be seen along the Scenic Drive south of Carefree and Cave Creek. The Conservation Committee of the Cave Creek Improvement Association would like to encourage you to stop and examine these specimens in order to become more familiar with our local trees.

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