

Arizona's chaparral plant is shrub live oak

by Bert Edises

What's the difference between a tree and a shrub? If you can walk under it, it's a tree. If you have to walk around it, it's a shrub. That's not a botanically exact definition, but it's a good practical one and easy to remember.

Is chaparral a shrub? Many people think so, but in fact it is a community of many different shrubs, among which one species usually is dominant. Chaparral shrubs are commonly evergreen. They grow to a height of 3 feet to 10 feet. Their favorite habitat is mountainsides, canyons and bajadas at elevations of from 1,000 feet to 6,000 feet, and where the rainfall is from 10 inches to 20 inches per year. Chaparral plants tend to crowd together so closely that they are often impenetrable by man or horse. But closeness does not mean sameness, and in fact the plants that make up the chaparral association are very different from one another. Nevertheless, they have certain important features in common: dense, compact crowns, multiple stiff branches, large, deep root systems, and leaves that are hard, flat and usually evergreen.

In Arizona, chaparral covers an immense area, estimated at well over 3 million acres. It occupies a broad band stretching from the Virgin Mountains on the northwest border with Nevada, southward to the mountains below the Mogollon Rim, and continuing south to the drier mountains of southeastern

sumac, silklasels and desert ceonothus. Any of these plants may attain local dominance. Other plants that may participate in the shrub live oak community are hollyleaf buckthorn, cliff-rose, desert olive, sophoras, Arizona rosewood, Lowell ash, and barberry.

leather leggings that cowboys use to protect their legs and trousers from the surgically sharp twigs and leaves of chaparral and similar vegetation. While they probably originated in the western United States, chaps are utilized in all parts of the world which have the chaparral type of



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Although in a strict sense, chaparral is confined to the western United States and northern Mexico; very similar shrub communities are found in places throughout the world, having so-called "Mediterranean" climate, with cool, wet winters and a hot, dry growing season. Included among these places are Australia, Chile, South Africa and the area around the Mediterranean Sea.

In the Mediterranean region, chaparral is known as "maquis." While Southern California, the other major location of chaparral in the southwest, has the typical Mediterranean climate, Arizona does not, having a significant amount of rainfall during the summer monsoon. However, Arizona does have spring drought, which is essential to the flourishing of this shrub community.

Nesting birds are plentiful. They include the Scrub jay, Bushiti, Canyon wren, Crissal thrasher, Rufous-sided towhees, Brown towhees, Rufous-crowned sparrow and Black-chinned sparrow.

And finally, there is a well-known bird whose close association with chaparral has given him the second name of "chaparral cock," better known as Roadrunner.

The Desert Heritage class for Nov. 14 has been postponed because of conflict with the general membership meeting of the Cave Creek Improvement Association, which will be held at 7:30 p.m. The Desert Heritage class topic, "Birds of Our Area," will be rescheduled to a later date.

Watch this column for the new date. The next regularly scheduled class on reptiles presented by Peter Mayne will be from 7 to 8:30 p.m. on Nov. 21 at Cactus Shadows School, Room C3.