
Sonoran Desert Edible Plants

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A RICH HARVEST IS AVAILABLE TO YOU WITHOUT PLANTING OR WATERING

The Sonoran Desert has amazing plants, which provide a lot of edible foods for humans and animals, and is like living on a garden or farm, without having to plant or water anything! The desert's plants tolerate a lot more things than other plants in the U.S. can. For example, in Arizona cacti survive with way less water from rain than plants in other states because they store water in their flesh when it rains. They tolerate very high heat (over 100° in the summer), plus cold weather in the winter (low temperature in the 40s and sometimes falling below 32°).

So many of them are edible that they allowed the indigenous people to live off the land easily. For example, the most popular food is the fruit (which is a pod) from the mesquite trees. The pods can be eaten when they are fresh (although the seeds



inside are too hard for people to chew, as are parts of the pods) by horses, dogs, pack rats and people! But they are better harvested when they dry out in the summer, and start to fall off the trees. They can be baked at a low temperature (225° for 20 minutes) to further dry them, and then be ground in a food processor



or blender into mesquite flour (meal), which is sweet and delicious (has a caramel, chocolate or sugar flavor). Although it tastes sweet, it is low in sugar compared to its large amount of fiber. Also, it is low in fat and the pod contains proteins and is a source of calcium, magnesium, potassium, iron and zinc. The meal can be used to substitute for one-third of the flour in recipes (cookies, bread, cake, granola and more).

The next most popular foods include prickly pear pads (nopalitos, which have Vitamins A and C and small amounts of potassium, calcium and phosphorus) and fruits (calcium and Vitamins A and C), plus saguaro fruits, all of which need to be harvested with tongs so hands don't get stickers in them. Prickly pear pads need to be harvested in the spring when fresh, must be de-thorned, and are cooked in various ways, according to different desert cookbooks. They have soluble fibers and are like green beans when sliced and cooked, although the taste always varies. They are very popular in Mexico, so they are available in jars at grocery stores in the Mexican food section. These prickly pear fruits, which should be harvested

when a deep crimson color, are good. They can be dropped by tongs into a brown paper shopping bag, and shaken until the spines fall off. They can then be rinsed in a colander, cut in half, simmered in a cup of water for about 12 minutes while mashing the fruits, then strained through cheesecloth or a pillowcase to produce a wonderful juice; the juice can be



made into syrup, candy or jelly, can be added to water or lemonade, or used to replace water in recipes for desserts, pancakes and more. When the fruit is cut in half, if the fruit pulp is thick inside, the seeds can be removed and the sweet pulp eaten.

The saguaro fruits are fleshy, have over 2,000 nice crispy seeds inside, and a high sugar content. They are harvested when crimson in July-August by two people, with one person knocking off the fruit with a long hooked stick (as they are usually 20 feet or higher from the ground), and the other person catching it in a bowl or bag or picking it up off the ground. To prepare the fruit, combine each pint of fruit



with one cup of water. Mash fruit to break up the clumps. Allow the fruit/water mixture to stand overnight in a covered container. The next morning, bring the fruit to a boil and simmer five minutes. Force fruit and liquid through a fine sieve or food mill to separate the seeds from the pulp. Seeds can be dried and stored for use in breads, cereals, salads, or wherever you want a delicate flavor and crunchy texture.



A fourth desert food is Mormon Tea (also known as Brigham tea, squaw tea and more). It was traditionally used for allergy control and reducing nasal congestion. It



contains tannin and resin and is an American ephedra species, but doesn't contain any of the various ephedrine-type alkaloids found in the Chinese species of the plant. It has a refreshing astringent taste due to high tannin content and is caffeine free. It is recommended that you don't drink too much of it!

Other edible foods include jojoba nuts, which contain wax (used in shampoo), so they should be put in cold water, brought to a boil for a minute and water poured off. Then repeat it two more times. After being brought to a boil three times, they are softer and less bitter. One book says that overeating them can cause the runs! Palo Verde pods, only when fresh with beans inside (because beans eventually get too hard to eat), can be blanched in boiling water for a couple of minutes, and the peas squeezed out. The peas taste like green peas. Also, cholla buds (unopened flowers) can be harvested, soaked covered overnight and, with softened spines rubbed off, sautéed in unsalted butter.

To buy desert foods or books: visit Desert Botanical Garden in Phoenix, Arizona; Native Seed Search in Tucson, Arizona (in person or online <http://www.nativeseeds.org/>; Casa de Fruta in California for mesquite meal (online at <http://www.casadefruta.com/mesquite.php>). For a couple of recipes and more edible foods and books, visit <http://www.deserteyeeducation.com/UpcomingEvents.html>

