

# The Giant Saguaro

*By Tom McDonald*

The state flower of Arizona belongs to the Saguaro, the signature plant of the Sonoran Desert. Growing up to 50 feet in height and weighing in at a robust 9 tons, this cactus is truly the king of all it surveys.

Saguaros have adapted a number of strategies to survive the rigors of desert life. First, its root system spreads from each plant in all directions, just below the surface of the soil, for at least as far as it is tall. Second, the Saguaro is structured like an accordion with the ability to expand to take in large amounts of water during the rainy season, up to 200 gallons, then shrinks back down as these water reserves are depleted during the hot summer months. Unfortunately the plant has no 'shut down' mechanism to not take in moisture and has been known to split or even fall over from an excess of water.

The Saguaro is a slow growing plant, especially in the first 12 years or so. Typically it reaches 10 feet around its 45<sup>th</sup> birthday and arms begin to appear at 75 years. In terms of longevity, the Saguaro is short-lived compared to other Sonoran Desert plants. (See chart below).

The O'odhams greatly respected the Saguaro and considered them nearly human. According to legend, each Saguaro represented an Indian warrior and the arms his wives. A drooping arm signaled a bad wife, but if it turned up again, it meant the husband had straightened her out!

The Saguaro blooms from late April to early June producing a succulent red fruit highly prized by the Native Americans. Traditionally, the fruit was harvested using tools made from the ribs of the Saguaro lashed together in long poles. After the harvest, the celebration would begin to 'bring down the clouds' signaling the start of the monsoon season. A wine called navait was produced but had to be consumed within 24 hours or it would spoil. This made for quite a wild celebration! The fruit is very nutritious, with considerable fat, protein and vitamin C. Seeds were ground into flour, two tablespoons of which provided up to 75 calories.

Working in teams, the modern day fruit harvester might use a telescoping pool skimmer instead of Saguaro ribs to knock the plump fruit into waiting baskets. The fruit pulp can be frozen for later use or soaked in water [1 cup water to 2 cups pulp]. Soak the fruit for 6 to 8 hours then use your fingers to separate the seeds out. Boil the remainder of the resulting liquid, reducing it by half or more to make syrup.

Consider this: Saguaros are only found in the Sonoran Desert yet their iconic silhouette is synonymous with 'desert' and 'southwest', gracing everything from cans of refried beans in Texas to John Ford westerns filmed in Monument Valley New Mexico, both hundreds of miles from the Saguaro's true habitat. According to Superstition Area Land Trust volunteer and ethnobotanist David Morris, the Saguaro arrived here well after the first humans, evolving to survive in this environment from similar cacti further south. Just goes to show you that even giant cactus know a good neighborhood when they see one.

*Tom McDonald is owner of Smiling Dog Landscapes and Learning Center and is President of the Superstition Area Land Trust. For more information visit [www.smilingdoglandscapes.com](http://www.smilingdoglandscapes.com) and [www.azsalt.org](http://www.azsalt.org).*