

The Saguaro cactus (*Carnegiea gigantea*) is one of the defining plants of the Sonoran Desert. These plants are large, tree-like cacti, with branches (or arms) as they age. These arms generally bend upward and can grow over 25 feet. Saguaros are covered with protective spines, white flowers in the late spring, and red fruit in summer. The Saguaro is the largest cactus in the United States and is a very slow growing cactus. Saguaro can grow to be between 40-60 feet tall (12-18m). Though it grows slowly, the Saguaro cactus can live for a very long time, approximately 200 years. Water takes up 75% to 90% of its mass, and when it is fully hydrated it can weigh between 3200-4800 pounds. This cactus is found in southern Arizona.

Saguaros are important to the Sonoran ecosystem, since they provide food and shelter for many desert animals. They're the desert go-to for nesting and perching birds and a protective home for other animals. Small birds lay nests inside the Saguaro's pulpy flesh, and large ones build stick nests on the arms. Saguaro flowers, fruit, and flesh provide nectar, moisture, and food for birds, bats, mammals, reptiles, and insects. Saguaro fruits develop right before summer monsoon rainfall, and after the dry phase of early summer, the fruits serve as a critical food and moisture source for animals. Since they're often the tallest thing standing in the desert landscape, they can fill the niche that is usually occupied by trees. Once a Saguaro has died and fallen, its decomposing body provides important organic matter to the desert ecosystem.

Not only is the Saguaro cactus an important food source for animals, but for the indigenous people of the Sonoran Desert as well. It is also very special to Hohokam culture. Archaeological evidence indicates that the Hohokam people of the modern-day Tucson area used the Saguaro in their daily lives. For the present-day Tohono O'odha, believed to be descendants of the Hohokam, the Saguaro is a sacred plant, used for both ceremony and sustenance. The Saguaro plays an integral role in the culture of the Tohono O'odham people. It has been written that the Saguaro can be ecologically connected to nearly every other organism in its range, including humans. The Tohono O'odham, Kimel O'odham, Hia c-ed O'odham and Seri have used the Saguaro as a food source and used Saguaro ribs as construction material. Many members of the Tohono O'odham Nation still harvest Saguaro fruit to this day, as the harvest marks their new year and provides them with Saguaro syrup for the year to come.

The Saguaro plant being such an important part of its ecosystem, natural heritage, and culture as well, makes it such a powerful plant native to the US. There is no plant like it. It is necessary for the life of animals residing in the Sonoran Desert in multiple ways, so important to the people in this region, and incredibly important to the ecosystem. It is also gorgeous, with beautiful white flowers growing from its cactus arms, blooming into nutritious red fruit essential to animals and the Sonoran people. This cactus serves as a food source for animals and humans. It is also shelter for animals, and beneficial to its natural ecosystem. The Saguaro shows the importance plants have in this country and how necessary they are for animals, culture, the ecosystem, and the region. The incredible Saguaro showcases why it is the perfect display of an iconic US native plant. Not only does the Saguaro symbolize the uniqueness of America and its landscape, but also plays such an important role in the Sonoran region and honors its cultural and natural heritage.

Bibliography

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