

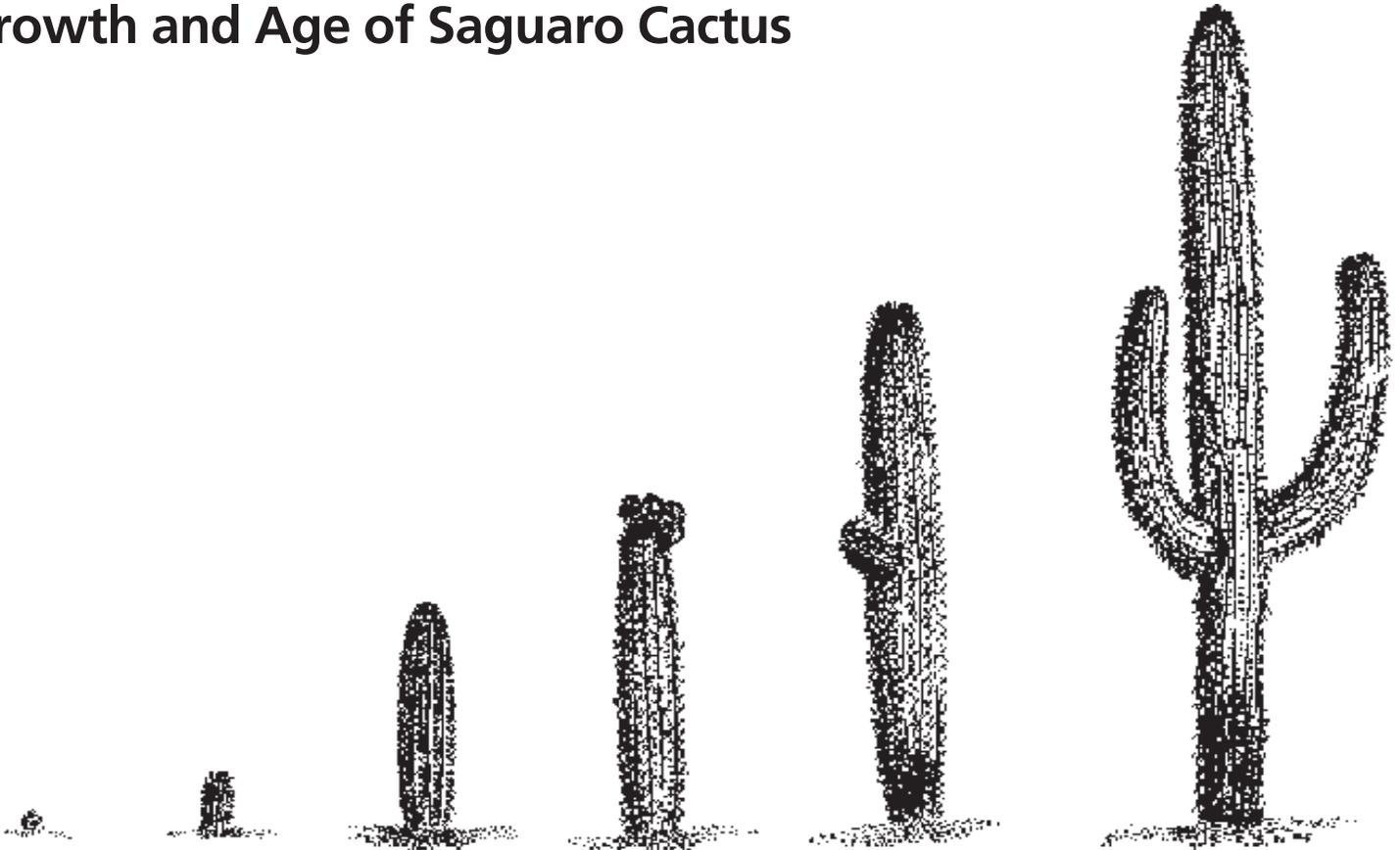
Organ Pipe Cactus

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Organ Pipe Cactus
National Monument

Growth and Age of Saguaro Cactus



One Inch tall	One Foot tall	3 Feet tall	First Flowers	First Arm	Full Height
10 years	30 years	50 years	6-1/2 feet tall 70 years	15-16 feet tall 95-100 years	43 feet 200 years

How Does It Grow?

A single saguaro cactus can produce millions of seeds in its lifetime. Only a few of these seeds actually sprout. Even fewer grow to maturity. The most successful cactus begins its growth under the shade of a larger plant, commonly called a nurse plant.

Almost any plant can become a nurse plant. Shade from the nurse plant protects the delicate cactus seedling from temperature extremes and sunburn.

Shaded soil holds moisture longer. Slowly decaying leaf litter adds nutrients. Leaf litter hides the tender young plant from hungry birds or animals seeking a juicy bite of salad.

The saguaro cactus seedling grows best in this protected, humid environment and enriched soil beneath its nurse plant. It grows very, very slowly.

How Old Is It?

No one knows for certain. Estimating the age of a cactus is difficult. There are no annual growth rings, as there are in trees. Rainfall, soil conditions and exposure to sunlight all influence the rate of growth.

Long-term scientific studies plus photographic records and other data aid researchers in estimating the age of saguaro cactus.

The data used here was determined from saguaro growing at the mouth of Alamo Canyon. Age and height relationships will vary in other parts of the Monument and in other parts of the Sonoran Desert. For instance, in a wetter environment such as that on the east side of Saguaro National Park in Tucson, growth rate is faster. A cactus one inch tall may be only six years old. It may reach a full height of 46 feet in merely 173 years.



All data from studies by Warren. F. Steenbergh and Charles H. Lowe, as recorded in Ecology of the Saguaro, III, 1983.