



Queen of the Night

A cryptic cactus with a beautiful secret

Background

The Queen of the Night, *Peniocereus gregii*, is a member of the Cactaceae (Cactus) family. It can be found growing at elevations between 2000 and 5000 feet in both the Sonoran and Chihuahuan Deserts. Like many plants in this harsh region, the Queen of the Night takes on an unassuming form for a majority of the year, waiting for the right time to make a brief, spectacular, appearance. This typical cactus consists of long and thin angular stems with a dull greyish-green to purplish coloration. The “leggy” stems are usually found growing under other desert plants such as creosote, palo verde, or mesquites. Most often, they are difficult to distinguish from the low branches of the plant they grow amongst. The Queen of the Night is sometimes referred to by its descriptive, yet underwhelming common name, Night Blooming Cereus. This common name does the plant no justice, because Queen of the Nights’ modest appearance is just a charade hiding some incredible secrets which makes it one of the most beautiful and interesting plants in the Desert Southwest.



Photo Park Volunteer

These synchronized blooms increase the chances of being pollinated. The blooms are difficult to predict but usually occur sometime between the end of May and the end of June. Flowers successfully pollinated by sphynx moths, bees, and beetles turn into bright red fruits that can measure 2-3 inches long. These sweet fruits are a welcome treat for many animals residing in the Queen of the Night’s domain. The consumed fruits allow for the dispersal of the seeds that will produce the next generation.

Threats to the Queen

The Queen of the Night is a magnificent plant that has drawn quite a following. Unfortunately, the same attributes making these cacti so incredible have also lead to their decline. They are threatened by the harvest of tubers and fruits as food, and people’s desire to cultivate the plants for use in landscapes and gardens. Habitat destruction and climate change have also contributed to their decline. Like many cacti in Arizona, it is protected under the Arizona Native Plant Protection Law. Queen of the Night is a New Mexico state endangered species, and has some international trade protection.

Fortunately, there are natural safe havens like Saguaro National Park and local botanical gardens, where the cactus threatened by development are given sanctuary.

Secrets Revealed

The Queen of the Night’s inconspicuous above-ground appearance hides a tuber, typically weighing between 5 and 15 pounds; some specimens tip the scales at over 25 pounds! The tuber stores all of the water and precious nutrients used for growth and production of the Queen’s flowers. Animals such as javelinas, rodents, and jackrabbits can cause severe damage to these plants by feeding upon the tubers and stems. Indigenous people prize the tuber as food and for its medicinal properties.

The Queen of the Night can produce several large, fragrant, white flowers a season; each flower blooming only for a single night, which withers shortly after sunrise. Interestingly, a large majority of the cacti bloom simultaneously throughout an area.



Photo Nic Perkins



Photo Tony Palmer



Refuge under a mesquite.

Photo Tony Palmer

Finding the Queen in Saguaro National Park

The Queen of the Night can be found growing wild in both districts of the park. Look for these cryptic cacti growing under other plants, along washes, and in the desert flats. If you would like to see some of Saguaro National Park's resident queens, your best bets are along the Loma Verde and Mesquite trails in the Rincon Mountain District (east), and the Desert Winds and Camp Pima trails in the Tucson Mountain District (west).



Photo Park Volunteer

Tohono Chul Botanical Garden

<http://tohonochulpark.org/>

Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum

http://www.desertmuseum.org/books/nhsd_peniocereus.php

Desert USA

<http://www.desertusa.com/cactus/night-blooming-cereus.html>