



Native Plants of the Chihuahuan Desert



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LECHUGUILLA (*Agave lechuguilla*)

Lechuguilla is an indicator species of the Chihuahuan Desert, the largest desert in North America. Individual plants grow in rosettes of fleshy blue-green sharp-tipped leaves. Each rosette consists of 20–50 leaves and measures 8–24 inches (20–60 cm) tall. This agave species flowers only once when the plant reaches maturity at 10–20 years. Flower stalks grow rapidly up to 8.5 feet (2.6 m) tall, with up to 8 inches (20 cm) of growth per day possible. Green to yellowish flowers cluster at the top of the stalk and then the plant dies. Lechuguilla reproduces by seeds as well as clones that sprout from its roots.

SOTOL (*Dasyllirion leiophyllum*)

Smooth-leaf sotol is a succulent shrub that has long, narrow, green, and glossy leaves edged with rust-colored recurved teeth along the leaf margin. Sotol leaves are an average of 0.7–0.9 inches (2–2.5 cm) broad and 23–31 inches (60–80 cm) long, clumped basally around a short trunk. Individual plants can reach 4–6 feet (1.2–1.8 m) in both height and width. From May to August the plant will send up a flower stalk that can reach 12 feet (3.7 m) tall with white, greenish, or cream-colored blooms. Sotol is commonly found growing in soils with a limestone substrate like those found within the park.



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OCOTILLO (*Fouquieria splendens*)

Ocotillo is easily identified by its cluster of wavy, spiny stems reaching up to 15 feet (4.57 m) tall. Ocotillo is leafless most of the year, but when a good rainstorm soaks the soil the plant will quickly sprout small oval leaves about 2 inches (5 cm) long, which will remain until the soil dries out once again. While leafless, the ocotillo relies on chlorophyll in the stem for photosynthesis. Clusters of bright red flowers bloom at the end of each stem from March through June, depending on latitude, and then throughout the summer based on rainfall. These blooms give the plant its name, Ocotillo, which means “little torch” in Spanish.

PRICKLY PEAR (*Opuntia engelmannii* or *macrocentra*)

There are two known species of prickly pear in the park, the Englemann and purple prickly pear. These two species are characterized by flat, round to oblong-shaped pads that are blue-green in color. The purple prickly pear always has pads that are tinged red-purple. The Englemann prickly pear has white spines up to 3 inches (7.6 cm) long and are found in groups of up to six scattered around each pad. Purple prickly pear grows brownish to black spines in groups of 1–3 between 2–4 inches (5–10 cm) long. Both have bright yellow blooms in the spring and will bear ripe reddish-colored fruit in mid-to-late summer.



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CHOLLA (*Opuntia imbricata* or *leptocaulis*)

Walking stick cholla, or cane cholla, is a tree-like cactus consisting of several candelabra-like branches originating from a central trunk. Cylindrical joints measure .75–1.25 inches (1.9–3.2 cm) in diameter. This cholla’s magenta to purplish flowers bloom in late spring. The pollinated blossoms yield dry fruit that start green and turn rose to bright yellow as they ripen. Pencil cholla is a bushy cactus that grows best under the protection of other vegetation. This cactus is characterized by slender cylindric stems and bright red, grape-sized fruits that ripen in late summer to fall. The fruits are consumed by deer, quail, wild turkey, and many other small birds and mammals. Both cholla species are covered in spines.



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TORREY YUCCA (*Yucca torreyi*)

Torrey yucca are typically 3–10 feet (0.9–3 m) tall. This yucca species can have a single stem or be branched. The straight, rigid leaves end in a sharp point and radiate around the stem. Leaves are between 2–4.5 feet (0.6–1.3 m) and grow in an upward direction. The flower head can extend up to 2 feet (0.6 m) at the top of the stem and consists of many waxy, bell-shaped, creamy-white or purple-tinged flowers. Torrey yucca is also commonly referred to as “Spanish bayonet” or “Spanish dagger,” and sometimes “old shag” due to its unkempt appearance.

REDBERRY JUNIPER (*Juniperus pinchotii*)

This juniper species can occur as a large shrub or small tree reaching up to 20 feet (6 m) tall. It is often multi-trunked and can form dense clumps. Usually, several branches grow from the ground with an irregular crown. Junipers are characterized by small, hard berries that grow in bunches surrounded by evergreen leaves. Berries of the redberry juniper are red to copper. Redberry junipers are hardy and will regrow from burnt or cut stumps. This species blooms in February and attracts butterflies, specifically the juniper hairstreak butterfly, which will lay its eggs on the tree.



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GRAY OAK (*Quercus grisea*)

Gray oak can grow as a shrub or small tree, reaching up to 30 feet (9.1 m) tall. It reaches its largest size in moist canyons, but is most commonly seen as a shrub in New Mexico. Gray oak is evergreen, but it sheds leaves during times of drought. Its small, leathery, gray-green, oval leaves give gray oak its name. The bark of gray oak is dark gray with narrow ridges and straight furrows. The leaves of this plant are browsed by livestock, deer, and porcupine. Some species of ground squirrels and birds feed on the nut. The wood is used for posts and fuel. Shrub-like gray oak can be seen on the Nature Trail.

HONEY MESQUITE (*Prosopis glandulosa*)

Honey mesquite grows as a shrub or small tree, reaching up to 30 feet (9.1 m) tall, with a crown that is equal to or wider than the height. Twigs are armed with small thorns that can grow up to 2 inches (5 cm) long. This deciduous plant grows bright green, twice-compound, feathery leaves. Honey mesquite blooms in late April, but can sometimes bloom as late as August in rainy years. The flowers are tiny, yellow-green, and fragrant. Pollinated flowers produce long, yellow-brown, slightly flattened pods with mild constrictions between seeds. Wildlife and domestic livestock consume its fruit and disperse the seeds.



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ALGERITA (*Berberis trifoliolata*)

Algerita is an evergreen shrub that typically reaches 3–6 feet (0.9–1.8 m) tall. Its rigid branches will often form thickets. The holly-like leaves of the algerita are gray-green to blue-gray in color, and they are placed singly at different heights on the stem. This shrub produces numerous 0.5 inch (1.3 cm) wide, bright yellow flowers that grow in tight clusters. The flowers of the algerita are quite fragrant and they perfume the air near Carlsbad Cavern’s Natural Entrance each year between February and March. Edible, bright red berries will appear May through June and are consumed by songbirds .

CREOSOTE (*Larrea tridentata*)

This evergreen shrub can grow 3–5 feet (0.9–1.5 m) tall. Creosote has numerous flexible stems that originate at an angle from the base. Stems are covered with tiny rich-green leaflets that are 0.2–0.4 inch (0.5–1 cm) long, growing in pairs of two leaflets attached at the base and pointed at the ends. Leaves are often sticky with resin. Creosote can bloom from March through early fall. Shrubs are covered by tiny yellow flowers that can give the entire plant a yellowish tint from a distance. In the Southwest, creosote is well known for the strong fragrance it emits after a heavy rain.



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NEW MEXICO AGAVE (*Agave neomexicana*)

The New Mexico agave has broad succulent leaves that form a basal rosette 6–18 inches (15.2–45.7 cm) across. Leaves are light green with an ash overtone. After approximately 8–20 years of growth, the plant will put out a tall flowering stalk that can grow 7–20 feet (2.1–36 m) tall at a rate of up to 4 inches (10 cm) a day. The stalk bears yellow tubular flowers clustered on several lateral branches. The New Mexico agave is often referred to as a “century plant” because it will bloom only once in its life, and then the entire plant dies. Often before the death of the mother plant, several clones start growing nearby.

CATCLAW MIMOSA (*Mimosa aculeaticarpa*)

Catclaw is a shrub that grows commonly throughout the Chihuahuan Desert. During wet years, catclaw can overgrow trails in the national park quickly, making it a good idea to wear thick protective clothing. The recurved spines on the branches of the catclaw will catch on clothing and skin. Leaves are small, oval, and twice pinnately compound, with up to eight leaflet-bearing axes containing as many as 12 or more pairs of leaflets per axis. Blooms begin appearing in April and are small, pink, and fluffy. The fruit of the catclaw is a red-brown seed pod up to 1.5 inches (3.8 cm) long whose margins are either prickly or unarmed.



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