



Chihuahuan Desert Native Plants

What do you think of when you hear the word *desert*? Perhaps you think of a sunburned landscape with little water. It's true! Yet even in this region of little rain and immense sun, many plant species have been surviving and thriving for millennia. Plants are able to live in the desert because they have adapted to their environment. The plants described below are native Chihuahuan Desert plants that can be found at Chamizal National Memorial.

Chamizo/Chamiza

Atriplex canescens

A small tract of land just west of the memorial was known as *El Chamizal* because the chamiza was a common shrub in the area. It is from this plant that Chamizal National Memorial gets its name. The chamiza, or four-wing saltbush, is a hearty shrub with prickly leaves. The plant thrives in salty soils. Tiny hairs on the chamiza's leaves conserve water. Indigenous people used the leaves as a seasoning, mixed the leaves with other greens to eat much like spinach, and ground the seeds for meal. This shrub is common in the area surrounding El Paso and a few have been planted at the memorial.



Desert Spoon

Dasyliirion wheeleri

Desert spoon is often mistaken for a yucca. The plant must store energy for years before it can produce a stalk with tiny cream-white blossoms. Its short and thick central stem is the base for its numerous long, thin, flat, bluish-green leaves. These leaves have a spoon shaped base, hence the common name desert spoon. American Indians used the leaves for weaving baskets and sleeping mats. More recently, the heart has been fermented to produce a liquor called *sotol*.



Prickly Pear Cactus

Opuntia sp.

The prickly pear cactus stores water in its pads for use during the dry season. Animals, such as the javelina (a.k.a. collared peccary) chomp on these pads regularly. In April, prickly pear cacti produce flowers in a range of colors from yellow to pink. The cactus produces fruit in the spring and summer. Prickly pear cactus juice is used to make special candy and honey, while the pads of the plant (*nopales*) are often sold in the produce section of grocery stores.



Don't pick native plants— they poke back. OUCH!

Ocotillo

Fouquieria splendens

For at least two-thirds of the year, the ocotillo remains patiently dormant with its tall stems reaching for the sky. However, this unique plant awakens during two different seasons. In April, bright red flowers bloom on the tip of the stems. Then in mid-summer, during the monsoon thunderstorm season, the ocotillo sprouts hundreds of miniature green leaves. Whether alive or dormant, enjoy the ocotillo from a distance—its thorns are unforgiving!



Barrel Cactus

Ferocactus wislizenii

Appropriately named, the barrel cactus survives long periods of drought by storing water inside its sponge-like barrel. The large pleats in its trunk allow it to expand like an accordion as it absorbs precious moisture. The barrel cactus produces yellow flowers in April and May. The flowers eventually turn into an edible fruit that American Indians harvested and stored as a food source. The needles were used for sewing, body piercing, and as fish hooks. Unfortunately, barrel cacti are no longer common in the surrounding desert due to poachers harvesting them for area gardens.



Century Plant

Agave americana

The century plant has a shallow but vast root system that allows it to take in more water than would be possible with a long taproot. The stems of the century plant funnel water to its center where it needs water most. For most of its life, the plant does not bloom. However, once in its lifetime, which is approximately 10 to 15 years long (not a century), the century plant produces a tall stalk. The stalk can grow up to 14 feet high, and it produces white flowers. After the stalk blooms, the plant dies. But death is all part of nature's cycle: the decaying plant gives nutrients to the soil and another century plant will grow in its place. Also known as American aloe, American Indians used the century plant as a source of food, medicine, and yes, soap.



Shin Dagger/Lechuguilla

Agave lechuguilla

The lechuguilla, or shin dagger, has a shallow root system that enables it to drink up rainwater. All parts of this plant were harvested by American Indians. It was a source of fiber for weaving baskets and floor mats and used to make brooms and brushes. The sharp tips were used as needles for binding animal hides. The roots were used for soap, and the fruit was consumed during times of famine. This plant is appropriately named—shin dagger—as its thorns are extremely sharp!



Xeriscaping

Xeriscaping is a type of gardening that is gaining momentum across the Desert Southwest. Many front-yards and backyards have green grass and pretty flowers that require frequent watering. However, in xeriscaping, the only water that is needed comes naturally from the sky above. Xeriscape gardening involves planting native plants, such as the ones listed above. By having a yard full of native desert plants, your yard will blend in with natural surroundings and attract native wildlife such as hummingbirds. Most importantly, xeriscaping conserves water. Scientists tell us that global warming is making the Desert Southwest warmer and drier. Water will become an even more precious resource if this happens. In 1732 British historian Thomas Fuller captured this dilemma quite well when he stated, "We never know the worth of water till the well is dry." What is water worth to you?

Did you know that approximately 80% of all Chihuahuan desert native plants were used in some manner by past hunter and gatherer and American Indian cultures?