



COMMON PLANTS OF THE SONORAN DESERT

When asked to describe a desert, many people imagine extreme heat and miles of sand dunes. They wonder how anything could possibly survive in such a hostile environment. Actually, this region has an incredible variety of vegetation. The following is not an exhaustive catalog of plants in the area, but it will help to identify many of the more common ones.

Trees, Shrubs, and Strange Characters

Palo Verde

This tree may grow to a height of 25'. It is easily distinguished from other acacias by its apple-green bark. The tiny leaflets are shed during dry weather. In spring, the tree produces masses of petite yellow flowers, followed by a 3" seedpod.

Mesquite

Mesquites may grow to a height of 20'. Their leaves are larger than the palo verde's. The bark is gray-brown, the bloom looks like a caterpillar, and the seedpod resembles a green bean.

Catclaw

This acacia seldom grows more than 5' tall. The plant gets its name from its curved thorns. The flowers are small, yellow fuzz balls, and the seedpods are twisted.

Creosote Bush

This tough plant may grow to 12' in height. Small yellow-green leaves are covered with a waxy resin to help conserve water; this coating is what gives the plant its characteristic smell. Yellow flowers appear in early spring, followed by small, fuzzy, white fruit.

Desert Willow

This tree grows to a height of 25', and is covered with dark brown, scaly bark. Narrow 3-6" long leaves grow off slender, hairy twigs. Large, pink to purple orchid-like flowers are followed by 4-8" long cigar-like fruit pods.

Ocotillo

This plant has impressive thorns, but is not a cactus. Its many branches have small leaves that are shed in dry weather. In the spring, each branch sports a flame-red cluster of tiny flowers.

Yucca, Sotol, and Agave

These plants are often confused with each other, but the blossoms can help with identification. Sotol flowers look like a bottlebrush. Yuccas have bouquets of creamy white flowers. The agave's pale yellow flowers grow on short stems, so the stalk somewhat resembles a tree.

Seen up close, sotol leaves are flexible, with hooks on the margin, and a frayed tip. Yuccas have a sharp tip on their leaves, but no hooks. The agave's leaves have hooks on the margins, and a 2-3" spine on the tip.

Common Cacti

Cacti are succulents, plants that are capable of storing water. The stem swells during wet weather, and then contracts during a drought. One of the first things people notice about desert plants are the thorns. These spines are not there just to poke. They also provide shade, break up wind currents (which reduces evaporation), and any moisture that condenses on them drips onto the ground where the roots can absorb it.

There are two main types of cacti in the Southwest – opuntia and cereus. Segmented cacti, such as prickly pear and cholla, belong to the Opuntia family. Members of the Cereus family, such as saguaro, barrel, hedgehog, and pincushion, are columnar. Opuntias have fine spines, called glochids, as well as large ones; cereus cacti only have large spines.

Saguaro

With a life expectancy of up to 200 years, the saguaro can reach a height of 50' and weigh as much as 10 tons. Although each plant varies, they may have as many as 3-4 dozen arms. Large white blossoms (Arizona's state flower) open on warm May nights, and the red fruits will ripen about a month later.

Barrel

The barrel cactus has no arms, is much shorter than the saguaro, and generally has red-orange or yellow blossoms. It also tends to lean towards the sun, which gives it its other name “compass cactus”.

Young saguaros can be confused with the barrel cactus. Just look at the spines. Saguaro spines are straight and grayish. Barrel cactus spines are curved and multicolored.

Hedgehog

The hedgehog is much smaller than the barrel cactus. It grows in clumps of up to several hundred plants, and puts out deep maroon colored flowers.

Pincushion

The pincushion cactus might easily be overlooked. It is often no larger than a man's fist. The flowers are generally pink, and grow in a halo around the plant rather than on the tip like those of most other cacti. The red fruits look like small chili peppers.

Prickly Pear

This cactus resembles a string of dinner plates or hot water bottles. Most varieties have yellow blossoms. The 3" long fruits are red to purplish in color. After the pads get older, they become very tough and fibrous. This doesn't stop javelina from eating them, spines and all!

Cholla

There are more than 20 species of cholla. They are usually tree-shaped, and look like strings of sausages. There are several varieties at Tonto National Monument.

The buckhorn cholla looks like its namesake. The branches are more slender and less spiny than are those of its relatives.

The chain fruit cholla sometimes reaches a height of 12'. As might be expected from its name, the fruit grows in long chains. It never ripens, but eventually breaks off and takes root.

Teddy bear chollas are fuzzy-looking, but don't be fooled by their cuddly name and appearance. Those spines are barbed! The sections are loosely attached to the main stem, and are responsible for this plant's reputation of jumping on exposed ankles.

The Desert Christmas Cactus has the most slender stems of all the chollas. It might be easily overlooked, except for the bright red fruits, since it often shelters under trees and bushes.

During your visit to Tonto National Monument, remember that these areas belong to all of us. Please stay on the trail. Do not lean on, touch, or climb on the walls. Do not remove any rocks or plants, and enjoy the animals from a distance.