



Common Native Plants of the Northern Chihuahuan Desert



Although the desert may seem an empty wasteland at first glance, a closer look will quickly dispell that illusion, as many things grow in the desert soil. In fact, many of the native plants that thrive in the arid landscape of White Sands have long been used by Native Americans for a variety of purposes.

Soaptree Yucca *Yucca elata*

The soaptree yucca uses stem elongation to stay above the advancing dunes. This yucca produces cream-colored blooms in May. The yucca is a virtual “store” in the desert as American Indians used most parts of the plant. The young flower stalks are rich in vitamin C. The flower pods can be boiled or roasted like a potato. The leaf fibers were used for the fabrication of rope,

matting, sandals, baskets, or coarse cloth. The roots were chopped and boiled to produce soap to wash hair, blankets, and rugs.



Hoary Rosemary Mint *Poliomintha incana*

The hoary rosemary mint, an aromatic shrub in the mint family, is usually less than three-feet tall. The plant has silvery hairs that cover its leaves and stems to help prevent the plant from drying out. It produces pale purple to white flowers in clusters from April through June.

American Indians used the plant for seasoning foods.



Purple Sand Verbena *Abronia angustifolia*

The perennial purple sand verbena is a member of the Four o'clock family and is often the only conspicuous wildflower in the heart of the dunes. This low-growing plant produces pale pink to purple flowers with white centers and blooms from late April into May. Its fragrant smell is particularly noticeable in more humid times, such as early morning. Sand grains stick to its oval hairy leaves, giving it a silvery appearance. The

purple sand verbena was used by American Indians as a mild sedative, which had a calming effect and was useful in reducing nervousness, anxiety, and tension.



Tree Cholla *Cylindropuntia imbricata*

The tree cholla sprouts new plants from a parent, creating colonies of many plants of varying heights. Magenta flowers are followed by yellow fruit, which remain on the plant all winter and are often mistaken for flowers. Its fruits can be eaten raw or cooked but are fairly dry and tasteless. The flower buds were used by early Americans as a

diuretic. A hair tonic was made from the roots that had been soaked in water.



Skunkbush Sumac *Rhus trilobata*

The skunkbush sumac, also known as squawbush or lemonade bush, forms pedestals by binding gypsum sand grains into a compact mass around its roots, branches, and trunk. In the spring before the leaves appear, clusters of yellow and white flowers make the plant stand out. The plant also produces red and orange berries used by American Indians to make a tart lemonade-like drink. The flexible stems of the plant were used for basketry

and binding. The branches contain tannin, which is useful in producing dyes. Crushed leaves were used as an astringent to treat stings, bites, rashes, and sunburn.



Rio Grande Cottonwood *Populus-deltoides ssp. wislizeni*

The Rio Grande cottonwood often appears stunted because much of its trunk is buried by the sand. A member of the willow family, its presence here indicates a dependable water source. Its wood is soft and valued for its workability and texture. It was used by American Indians for masks and cylinders for drums. Strips of the branches and bark were woven into baskets. The tree's buds and flowers are edible. The bark has purported

curative powers and was used for treating bruises, strains and sprains. A tea made from the bark is an anti-inflammatory agent and mild diuretic.



Mormon Tea/Longleaf Jointfir *Ephedra trifurca*

Mormon Tea is a short, spiny stick-like shrub with thin green stems. The leaves are like tiny scales and grow only at the plant's nodes, giving it the appearance of a tiny bamboo-like plant. Small pale yellow flowers appear in the spring. Both the stems and the roots are high in flavonoids and were used as medicines by American Indians. Early pioneers used the stems to brew a weak tea for medicinal purposes. The plant contains traces of ephedrine, which

is a stimulant and decongestant effective in countering symptoms of the common cold. The twigs were also used to dye wool.



Claret Cup Cactus *Echinocereus triglochidiatus*

The claret cup cactus, also known as strawberry hedgehog, is primarily found north of the dunes in the Tularosa Basin. The claret cup cactus blooms in late spring with gorgeous crimson chalice flowers that give the plant its name. These bright flowers cover large clumps of the cactus, making it easy to spot. The cactus can reach huge sizes with older individual plants growing up to five feet in diameter with more than 75 stems. The fruits

of the claret cup cactus are some of the sweetest of any desert plant. The fruits are covered with spines as they develop but shed the spines as the fruit ripens.



Chihuahuan Desert

The Chihuahuan Desert is the largest of the four deserts in North America. More than 70% of it lies in Mexico. The rest is found in the United States, covering the majority of far west Texas known as the Trans-Pecos. Finger-like projections cross into New Mexico. White Sands National Monument is on the northern edge of this desert within the Tularosa Basin. It is a high-elevation desert with long

hot summers and cool winters. Most of the area's precipitation occurs in July and August from intense and fast thunderstorms known as monsoons. Winds can be severe with the greatest velocities occurring in March and April. These winds are an important factor in the formation and movement of the gypsum sand dunes at White Sands.