

Name: _____

The Amazing Saguaro Cactus

By Guy Belleranti



You've probably seen a person-sized cactus in a movie. Maybe you've seen a tiny one on a desk. But did you know the largest cactus ever recorded was 78 feet (23.8 m) tall? It was a saguaro—the largest species in the United States.

Saguaros grow only in the Sonoran Desert. This desert is located in northwestern Mexico, southern Arizona, and a small section of southeast California.

Saguaros live only in part of this desert. They need summer and winter rains and mild winters without long freezes to grow. Few live above 4,000 feet (1,200 m), and those that do grow on warm, south-facing slopes.

Saguaros often begin life beneath “nurse” trees or shrubs. The “nurse” plants provide shaded moist places for the new cacti to grow. The saguaros grow very slowly. During the first 10 years they might only grow a couple of inches! That's hard to believe when you see saguaros 30 to 50 feet (9-15 m) tall. However, these are older adults and may be over 100 years old. In fact, some saguaros live 150 to 200 years.

Saguaros are 35 to 50 years old before growing their first flowers. And most are 50 to 75 years old before growing a first branch (or arm). Some saguaros get more arms than others and some get none. But one thing is certain—you never want to be hugged by one because they're covered with spines!

Saguaros provide food for many animals. The saguaro's large white flowers open on May and June nights at the top of the trunk and branches. Only

a few flowers open each night. They close early the next afternoon and never open again. But during this time birds, bats, and insects feed on the flowers' sweet nectar. Later that summer, the juicy red fruit feeds many other Sonoran Desert animals as well.



This fruit was also an important food for early Native Americans. Today, some still use the fruit in things such as jelly and candies.

Saguaros also provide shelter for animals. Birds such as Gila woodpeckers make nest holes in the cacti's fleshy stems. When woodpeckers leave, other birds move in.

The saguaro blossom is Arizona's state flower. Arizona has strict laws about collecting or destroying saguaros. That way, people in the future can still enjoy this amazing cactus.

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1. Which of the following statements about saguaros is true?
 - a. They grow throughout California.
 - b. They are too spiky for animals to get close to.
 - c. They are full-grown by 50 years old.
 - d. They only grow in the Sonoran Desert.
2. Reread the following sentence from the article.

But one thing is certain—you never want to be hugged by one because they're covered with spines!

In the sentence above, which of the following definitions of spine is being used?

- a. bravery or courage
 - b. another name for a backbone
 - c. a type of defensive spike
 - d. a thing's main feature or source of strength
3. Many different animals use saguaros. What type of animal that uses a saguaro is *not* mentioned in the article?
 - a. coyotes
 - b. birds
 - c. bats
 - d. humans
 4. Arizona has strict laws to make sure we have saguaros for a long time. Based on the article, what are *two* reasons Arizona might want to protect saguaros?
 1. _____
 2. _____
 5. You and a friend see a picture of a flowering saguaro cactus. Your friend says the plant is probably 25 years old. Are they correct? Why or why not?

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Fill in the missing letters to create a vocabulary word from the article. Then write the full word on the line. Be sure you spell each word correctly.

1. ___ p ___ c ___ e s

clue: a specific type of plant or animal

1. _____

2. ___ r ___ ___ k

clue: the thick center part of a tree or cactus

2. _____

3. ___ l o ___ s ___ ___

clue: another word for flower

3. _____

4. ___ o ___ s ___

clue: only a little wet

4. _____

5. s ___ o ___ e

clue: something slanted, like a mountain side

5. _____

6. m ___ l ___

clue: gentle; not extreme

6. _____

7. ___ r a ___ ___ h e ___

clue: the "arms" of a tree or cactus

7. _____

8. s ___ ___ n ___ s

clue: the needles on a cactus

8. _____

9. ___ l e ___ ___ y

clue: soft and moist, resembling meat

9. _____

10. n ___ ___ t a ___

clue: sugary liquid produced by plants

10. _____

ANSWER KEY

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- Which of the following statements about saguaros is true?
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- bravery or courage
 - another name for a backbone
 - a type of defensive spike**
 - a thing's main feature or source of strength
- Many different animals use saguaros. What type of animal that uses a saguaro is *not* mentioned in the article?
 - coyotes**
 - birds
 - bats
 - humans

- Arizona has strict laws to make sure we have saguaros for a long time. Based on the article, what are *two* reasons Arizona might want to protect saguaros? **Answers will vary.**

1. **Saguaro flowers are a state symbol.**

2. **Many animals need saguaros to survive.**

- You and a friend see a picture of a flowering saguaro cactus. Your friend says the plant is probably 25 years old. Are they correct? Why or why not?

No, they are not correct. Saguaros do not start growing flowers until 35-50 years old.

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Fill in the missing letters to create a vocabulary word from the article. Then write the full word on the line. Be sure you spell each word correctly.

1. s p e c i e s

clue: a specific type of plant or animal

1. species

2. t r u n k

clue: the thick center part of a tree or cactus

2. trunk

3. b l o s s o m

clue: another word for flower

3. blossom

4. m o i s t

clue: only a little wet

4. moist

5. s l o p e

clue: something slanted, like a mountain side

5. slope

6. m i l d

clue: gentle; not extreme

6. mild

7. b r a n c h e s

clue: the "arms" of a tree or cactus

7. branches

8. s p i n e s

clue: the needles on a cactus

8. spines

9. f l e s h y

clue: soft and moist, resembling meat

9. fleshy

10. n e c t a r

clue: sugary liquid produced by plants

10. nectar