

## Gentle Giants on the Sonoran Desert

The Gentle Giants of the Sonoran Desert stand in our backyards, along the highways, or an area near us. They are a wonder in our region. *Carnegiea gigantea* grows in Arizona on the Sonoran Desert or Great Basin Desert and nowhere else in the world. The name Saguaro is from the Spanish meaning large cactus with arms. The white nocturnal blossoms of the Saguaro are the Arizona State Wildflower. The Saguaro is a native plant occurring naturally in its particular region.

Characteristics of the Saguaro are its height and width, growing to 30 x 10 feet or more. Foliage and texture are coarse with green pleats, spines, and evergreen. The plant grows in full sun. Birds help the placement of the Saguaro by depositing seeds under “nurse” Palo Verde, Ironwood, or Mesquite trees where they grow until competition for water and nutrients kills off the nurse tree.

The plant is slow growing and is considered adult by 125 years. By 70 years it has reached six and half feet and produced its first flowering. In 50 to 70 years the first branches or arms appear and with lower precipitation it could be 100 years. In 95 to 100 years it reaches 15 to 16 feet.

An article in the Arizona Republic by S.E. Schlosser listed 8 things you may not know about the Saguaro:

1. Named for Andrew Carnegie
2. Native to Arizona; only found in the Sonoran Desert
3. Grows slowly; a young cactus may grow only 1 to 1-1/2 inches in 8 years. The adult reaches 60 feet and water impacts its growth.
4. In higher altitudes it grows on the South facing slopes. Low temperatures and frost can kill the Saguaro. It does not grow above 4000 feet.
5. The plant has pleats which allow expansion like an accordion according to the amount of water it takes in. It shrinks with reduced water supply. The number of pleats corresponds to the number of pleats in the vascular system.
6. The plant is very heavy when fully hydrated and can weigh more than 4 tons. Transplanting should be done by a professional.
7. The plant starts to produce white flowers in the spring at 35 years old. Its life span is about 150 to 200 years old. The oldest documented plant was 300 years old, over 40 feet, and had 52 arms.
8. Rarely, cells of Saguaro will mutate to form fan shaped crests on top of the main stems.

Saguaros are protected in Arizona under special laws found under [Agriculture.AZ.gov](http://Agriculture.AZ.gov). Harming one is illegal; moving one requires special permits. The plant is a virtual ecological hotel housing Cactus Wrens, Gila Woodpecker, and other wildlife. It has furnished food and structure to the local tribes for centuries.

The Tohono O’odham tribe holds the plant as an honored relative which sustains them both spiritually and physically. Mythology says that one Saguaro created one woman which sank deep into the earth and rose out of it with giant cactus arms. Once a year she dresses up with striking white flowers in her hair and bears crimson fruit called *bahidaj* in their language.