

Carnegiea gigantea

[Synonyms : *Carnegiea gigantea*, *Cercus gigantea*, *Cereus gigantea*, *Lepidocereus giganteus*, *Pilocereus giganteus*]

GIANT CACTUS is a cactus (succulent plant or tree). Native to the Arizona-Sonoran desert in the south-western United States and Mexico, it has creamy-white flowers with numerous stamens.

It is also known as Arizona giant, Giant saguaro, Giant sahuaro, Old saguaro, *Riesenkaktus* (German), Sage of the desert, Saguaro, Saguaro cactus blossom, Saguaro flower, Sahuaro, *Säulenkaktus* (German), and Suwarro.

The 20-100 ft. long shallow, horizontal roots permit the greatest absorption of rainwater. The crimson pulp inside the berry-fruit is centrally-embedded with about 3,000 small, black seeds. The flowers bloom for a night (when they are visited by fruit-eating bats and hawkmoths) a few at a time and close the following afternoon. By day the flowers attract bees, desert doves and humming birds.

The ripe red fruit are gathered by means of a forked stick tied to the end of a long pole (up to 40-50 ft. in length).

Gigantea means ‘gigantic, very or unusually large (or tall)’.

The giant cactus is alleged to live for 200 years and can weigh 6-12 tons, is the largest of all cacti, and when established it can grow about 4 in. a year. After a rainstorm, it will expand to hold 1 ton or more of moisture in its tissues (moisture which might not be replenished for as long as two-years). A large area near Tucson has been allocated for preserving this species but by the 1960s it contained no young plants as the seeds are eaten by rodents. A vicious circle had evolved as rodent numbers would normally have been kept under control by the excluded cattlemen whose sheep and cattle had trampled young plants. Then in the mid-1990s giant cactus became subject to another threat – amazingly, from man – when it acquired fashionability as a collector’s piece for landscaping with a price tag of around £1,000 for a suitable plant. To counter the ‘cactus rustlers’, as these new predators were called, the State of Arizona introduced ‘native plant policemen’ who even had to carry guns as the thieves were often armed. (Giant cactuses growing in the Tucson area are protected plants under the Saguaro National Monument established to commemorate and preserve them.)

For local tribes the fruit are an important source of food (raw, cooked, or sun-baked and rolled into balls as a preserve) especially the North American Tohono O’Odham and Yavapai and the Middle American Seri. Authorities suggest that for the Papago members of the Tohono O’Odham tribe it was even a staple in their diet. The fruit – or the syrup or juice – have been made into a drink, including a syrupy intoxicating beverage, by some of the Apache and Maricopa Indians and the latter continues to be used in some of the Tohono O’Odham rain ceremonies. Fruit pulp has been made into jam by the Pima and Tohono O’Odham Indian tribes. The seeds, which have provided food for chickens and pigs, are not only pounded into an edible paste (which amongst other things is used as a spread on tortillas) but are also dried into balls or blocks (the former by the Pima tribe and the latter by Yavapai Indians) for future use.

For centuries local North American Indians, particularly the Tohono O’Odham, have used the giant cactus’s inner woody support rods, left after a plant dies, as frames and roofing for their homes, and for lances – and some of the Tohono O’Odham are also said to have used them as splints for setting broken bones. They were also used apparently for making rough cages to trap birds – and they and the Seri Indians made them into various tools for, for instance, harvesting the fruit as well.

Several parts of the Tohono O’Odham tribe associated the beginning of a new year with harvesting these fruit.

Authorities have noticed that some of the Tohono O’Odham used the strong spines for tattooing.

The giant cactus flower is the State flower of Arizona in the southern United States, adopted in 1931. In February 1962 when Arizona celebrated her 50th anniversary of becoming a state in the Union the flower featured on an American postage stamp. It also appeared among the plants of the desert depicted on USA postage stamps in 1999.

Incredibly there is at least one animal, the bobcat, which can climb a giant cactus either to perch on or to steal birds’ eggs. It has learnt to place its paws on the sides of the vicious spines. Many different birds feast on the fruit, and birds such as the elf owl, rodents and snakes nest or sleep in trunk cavities initially hollowed out by certain species of woodpecker.

Medicinally, the Seri American Indians use giant cactus to treat rheumatism.