

Yucca brevifolia

[Synonyms : *Cleistoyucca brevifolia*, *Yucca arborescens*]

JOSHUA TREE is a succulent evergreen tree. Native to south-western North America (specifically the Californian deserts) it has small lily-like, yellowish-green flowers.

It is also known as Tree yucca.

The trees are unable to reproduce without pollination by a species of moth found only in its natural habitat. They grow at the rate of about 4 in. each year and the leaves function for about 12-20 years. The flower clusters can weigh up to 50 lbs. each and their leathery petals are ¼ in. thick. Apparently the amount of rain and the temperature determine the time (sometimes years) between flowerings and when the trees do break into blossom the flowers do not open as widely as those of other close relatives.

Brevifolia is derived from Latin *brevi-* (short, low, small, tiny) and *-folia* (leaved) components meaning 'short-leaved'.

Some say that the name Joshua tree was chosen by the Mormons. As they crossed the Californian deserts to Utah they are believed to have compared the trees' often ungainly branches to the outstretched arms of Joshua and, incorrectly, that these pointed the way out of the wilderness.

Some of the local North American Indian tribes harvested the seeds for food. Authorities have noted that the Cahuilla Indians also ate the flowers, the unripe fruit were eaten by the Tubatulabal, and the ripe fruit were enjoyed pit-roasted by the Kawaiisu (who also mashed, dried and stored them for future use).

Apart from the Cahuilla's use of fibre for making their sandals, interest in the tree would appear to have centred on its value for basketry. The Shoshoni made baskets with the roots, and both the Panamint and Kawaiisu tribes used strands split from the dark reddish-brown core of the roots for forming patterns on the outside of their coiled baskets. The Shoshoni dyed their baskets black and dark red by using the outer roots and the inner rootstock core respectively.

Apparently it provided part of the diet of the now extinct giant ground-sloth.

The wood when cut into layers (and the smallest of the red roots) has been used to make little boxes, baskets and other small items, and the fibre has been used for making paper (especially newsprint).

In 1936 south-central California saw the birth of the Joshua Tree National Monument which was established to preserve joshua tree forests in that area.