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Summer Care for Cactus

By: Dottie Holman

Cactus is the standard landscape plant here in the Southwest. There are many varieties and some that are indigenous to our region only. It is also believed that cactus require little care. Although they are not as delicate as an orchid, they do require some TLC.

Weather plays a major role in the health and well being of a cactus. Cacti adepts to living in hot dry areas but not all cacti can tolerate our hot summer months. Because of this, protection may be needed. Small barrel cactus need light shade or a sun cover in our hot July and August months until they become acclimated to the direct sun. Some people wrap their saguaros with a sunscreen in the summer. This is not a bad idea, however, once this habit is formed, it will be necessary to do it every summer since the saguaro will become dependent on it. Frost will present a problem also. Most cacti are frost sensitive; therefore, protection during a freeze is necessary.

Watering is not thought to be necessary for cactus. I mean, they only get watered out in the desert when there is a rainfall! Let me ask you this, how do those cactus look our there? For cactus's to look their best, supplemental watering is needed. From October to March, irrigation is not necessary. However, from April to September a little help from your hose would be helpful. For large mature plants, once a month should be adequate and every two to three weeks for smaller plants. August and September will require

you to really watch the weather. If our monsoons do not appear and the heat is high, additional water may be necessary. How do you tell if your cactus needs water? On columnar cactus (saguaro, barrel) look for a reduction in the space between the ribs. If you can't put a finger or two between the ribs or if the skin is not taut and pushes in when pressed the cacti needs water. On pad type cactus (prickly pear), the skin will look withered and warped and the pads will droop.

When watering, do it long and slow. The root system of cactus is long and close to the surface of the ground and has many off shoots. Water away from the plant itself (you do not want the water to contact the skin and sit around the base of the plant). A good rule of thumb is either half the height for a columnar or for smaller plants, a radius of two to three feet. Remember that a cactus will absorb water as long as it is there. It will drink until it bursts. So over watering will kill the plant or rot the root system. Of all the plants in your landscape, cactus requires the least amount of water. So if a bubbler is by your cactus, use it wisely or cap off or turn off the bubbler. Hand watering is the best way to keep your cactus looking good.

Transplanting is easy. Withhold water for several weeks from the cacti that you wish to transplant. This will place the cacti in a drought condition, which is a survival mode and helps it transplant easier. Prior to transplanting, mark the cactus as to which direction it is planted. This is necessary to avoid sunburn. Once dug up let it rest in a shaded, dry area for several weeks. When planting it, place it in a dry hole and withhold watering for 10 days.

There are very few ***diseases*** or ***pests*** that attack cacti. Cochineal scale is the most common and will not cause great harm unless it goes untreated.

Treatment is simple, a hard blast of the hose. In doing this, the water

exposes the insect and the air will kill it. Here is a little bit of history regarding the Cochineal scale. If you take the white cottony mass and squeeze it between your fingers it causes a red dye, which is what the Indians used to dye their clothes.

The Gila woodpeckers and saguaros have lived together for so many years that to part them is not possible. The saguaro protects itself from the wound caused by the woodpecker when making its nest. So just enjoy the nesting that is taking place. But bacterial necrosis will kill your saguaro. This bacterium can be caused by sunburn, frost, too much water or injury. The bacteria travel through the vascular system and cannot be seen until the damage has been done. The symptom is liquid black ooze that smells bad. If the infection is in an arm or at the top of the saguaro, removal of the diseased portion may offer some hope, but no guarantees.

A desert landscape is a water wise landscape. The use of cactus and native plants brings out the natural colors of our region. Desert blooms can be enjoyed throughout the year. So when planting your desert landscape, think of incorporating cactus but also brittlebush, creosote, Mexican primrose, Desert willow or agaves. You can truly make your very own desert garden.

Dottie Holman is a Lake Havasu City Master Gardener. For more information, you can contact the Lake Havasu City Master Gardeners Hot Line at 505-4105. Visit us at the LHC Library on the 1st Tuesday of every month from 11:00-1:00.

**CONTACT: VICKI COOMBS
ADMINISTRATIVE ASST
THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
MOHAVE COUNTY
COOPERATIVE EXTENSION
101 E BEALE ST STE A
KINGMAN AZ 86401-5808
928 753-3788/928 753-1665 (FAX)
mohavece@cals.arizona.edu**

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