

Moderation is key to Saguaro care

By: Mindy Siverson and Anne Chiu

I was called out to a house where a saguaro (*Carnegiea gigantea*) was dying because of too much water. Well over one hundred years old, the giant plant was next to a bubbler, watering it twice a week.

There was nothing that could save it. It had large holes and you could see the skeleton of the plant since it had been dead for some time. When placing one of these beautiful cacti in your yard think about where it will be placed; do not put it next to plants that must have water regularly. The majestic Saguaro is a dramatic accent plant all on its own.

A Saguaro's root system is shallow and close to the surface; roots travel far from the base to collect as much precipitation as possible. It is estimated that the roots extend outward from the plant about half its height and to a depth of four feet.

Saguaros are most prolific in the Sonoran Desert but are native to Northern Mexico, Southern California and Arizona. We have them in the desert surrounding Lake Havasu, which is a transition zone between the Sonoran and Mojave deserts.

Due to our drier and hotter climate, water your Saguaro in the summer months. Place a hose about five feet away from the trunk once a month for about 30 minutes. That is all that is needed; no watering in the winter is required.

Do not allow water to sit around the base of the cactus for a long period of time. A good rule of thumb is to look at the space between the ribs of the cactus. If you can not get one or two fingers between the ribs or if the skin gives way when you press it, the cactus needs water. The skin on a well-hydrated plant will be firm to the touch. The Saguaro requires about 10 inches of water annually.

Do not fertilize a Saguaro. It has adapted to our soil and gets the nutrients it needs.

Now and into June the Saguaro produces white blooms at the tips of the previous year's growth. Flowers bloom at night, spanning three to four inches. Large red sweet and edible fruit, a delicacy for man and animal, follows the flowers.

Transplanting a Saguaro over three feet tall is too heavy for one person, requiring additional help. Dig a hole about five inches larger than the circumference of the trunk and no deeper than the original soil line on the trunk.

A Saguaro needs to be planted in the same compass position so it will have same sun exposure as it had prior to transplanting to avoid sunburn. Carefully mark the western exposure side so it faces exactly the same direction at its new home.

In the wild, a young Saguaro grows under a parent plant. Over time, the western exposed side adapts to the sun and outgrows/outlives the parent plant. Except for early stages, a Saguaro is tenacious under hot, dry conditions with full to reflected sun. Reflected sun is the intense reflection of the sun off walls, driveways and walkways.

A Saguaro base is naturally black; its skin can become woody and flaky. The Most common problem encountered is from holes in the skin that allows air to penetrate. This can cause bacterial necrosis. The plant has black oozing, foul smelling patches, which can be very serious. Lethal infection is another common problem and develops from freeze damage, sunburn wounds and splitting. Cut out rotted areas with clean tools and dress the wound with sulfur. This can treat both an infection or e necrosis.

It pays to be watchful. Occasionally inspect your Saguaro - it is slow to show problems.

A dead or extremely unhealthy saguaro near a walkway is just as dangerous as a tree.

A mortally wounded or fallen Saguaro, like some trees can live up to 10 years on its stored reserves, even flowering in a last ditch effort to propagate.

With minimal care and attention to danger signs, a Saguaro is one of the easiest plants to maintain.

Mindy Siverson and Anne Chiu are Lake Havasu City Master Gardeners. For details, contact the Lake Havasu City Master Gardeners by callin their Hot Line at 505-4105

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

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, James A. Christenson, Director, Cooperative Extension, College of Agriculture & Life Sciences, The University of Arizona. The University of Arizona is an equal opportunity, affirmative action institution. The University does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, veteran status, or sexual orientation in its programs and activities.