



NATIVE PLANTS OF THE SONORAN DESERT

- 
- ▶ Buckhorn Cholla
 - ▶ Desert Marigold
 - ▶ Fishhook Barrel Cactus
 - ▶ Foothills Palo Verde
 - ▶ Globe Mallow
 - ▶ Ocotillo
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BUCKHORN CHOLLA



IDENTIFYING FEATURES:

Buckhorn cholla (*Cylindropuntia acathocarpa*) is an open and branching woody cactus. It has gray-green stems, also called “joints”, with nodules. Each nodule has a cluster of stiff spines. The flowers range from yellow to red with many shades in between. They bloom in April and May. The fruits are oval shaped, dry, and covered with long barbed spines.

HABITAT:

This cholla prefers to grow in well drained sandy desert soils, gravel slopes in the deserts and grass lands. They are also found growing in desert mesas, plans, hillsides and rocky foothills.



RANGE:

Elevations up to 4000 feet of the Sonoran and Mojave Deserts.

LIFE SPAN:

30 years or more.

SIZE:

This cactus will grow to be about 3 feet to 7 feet but it sometimes grows to about 13 feet.

QUICK FACTS:

Cholla's are a favorite nesting site for many birds. They are not so spiny that the birds are in danger, but spiny enough to protect them from many predators.

DESERT MARIGOLD



IDENTIFYING FEATURES:

The desert marigold (*Baileya multiradiata*) is a member of the Asteraceae family. The members of this family are characterized by individual florets arranged in dense heads making the floret group look like one single flower. On the marigold the clusters from a head 2 inches in diameter and are bright yellow in color. The leaves are green with silver-white hairs, lobed, and grow very low on the thick stems.

HABITAT:

These plants can be found growing on sandy or gravelly soils of roadsides, plains, washes, mesas, and pinyon-juniper communities.

RANGE:

Desert marigolds can be found across southern Arizona, southern Nevada and southwestern Utah south in to Sonora, Mexico, and through the Chihuahuan Desert to Texas.



LIFE SPAN:

Desert marigolds are considered perennial plants and therefore live for more than two growing seasons.

SIZE:

They can grow to be 1-2 feet tall and 2 feet across.

QUICK FACTS:

Desert marigold either fresh or dried, are poisonous to goats and sheep, but not to cattle or horses.

FISHHOOK BARREL CACTUS



IDENTIFYING FEATURES:


The fishhook barrel cactus (*Ferocactus wislizenii*) can be identified by its thick 2 foot diameter, barrel shaped body and long hooked spines. The yellow/red flowers and yellow fruit always grow at the top of the plant.

HABITAT:

Fishhook barrel cactus grow along desert washes and gravelly bajadas. It is less likely to occur on valley floors or rocky slopes.

RANGE:

This species of barrel cactus is found in south-central Arizona and northern Sonora, Mexico. There are scattered populations in southern New Mexico and western Texas.



LIFE SPAN:

Its life span is 50-100 years.

SIZE:

This cactus commonly grows 2-4 feet but may grow taller 6-8 feet tall. It can reach a diameter of 18-30 inches or more.

QUICK FACTS:

The Fishhook Barrel Cactus is often called the “Compass Barrel” because some of the larger plants lean toward the southwest.

This cactus does contain water, but the water contains oxalic acid and is likely to cause diarrhea if ingested when the stomach is empty.

FOOTHILLS PALO VERDE



IDENTIFYING FEATURES:

The Foothills Palo Verde (*Parkinsonia microphylla*) is sometimes called the little leaf palo verde or the yellow palo verde. This is because it has very little leaves and when in blossom the flowers are bright yellow. The green branches are spine-tipped, stiff and upright giving the tree its name. Palo Verde is Spanish for green stick referring to the tree's green bark.

HABITAT:

The foothill species of palo verde requires less water than the blue palo verde. Because of this, it found in the upland areas of the desert where the soil is more coarse.

RANGE:

These trees occur through out the Sonoran Desert except in the driest regions.



WILD STATUS:

The palo verde is doing well in its range.

LIFE SPAN:

These trees can live to be more than 100 years old, possibly as old as 400 years.

SIZE:

It is considered a large shrub or a small tree standing about 15 feet tall on average, occasionally reaching as tall as 30 feet.

QUICK FACTS:

The palo verde is the primary nurse plant for young saguaro cactus.

Humans have used the seeds of the palo verde for hundreds of years. Seri Indians eat the seeds fresh, toasted, or ground as flour. The Tohono O'odham prefer to eat the seeds fresh from the pods.

DESERT GLOBE MALLOW



IDENTIFYING FEATURES:

Desert globe mallow (*Sphaeralcea ambigua*) have 5 petaled flowers ranging from apricot to red-orange in color. They bloom quickly during the spring providing the desert with a splash of color. Their leaves are gray/green, 3-lobed, and toothed. Because their stems grow in all directions, this plant often looks more like a spiky round shrub.

HABITAT:

They can be found in arid environments with sandy, rocky or gravelly soil, sandy washes and rocky hillsides, sometimes among pinyon and juniper, below 4000 feet, as well as along roadsides.

RANGE:

These plants are found in the Mojave and Sonoran deserts of Southern California and Nevada, to southwest Utah through Arizona to northern Sonora and Baja Mexico.



LIFE SPAN:

The globe mallow is a perennial which means that it lives for more than two years.

SIZE:

Desert globe mallow typically grow in large clumps up to 3 feet in height and 2-3 feet wide.

QUICK FACTS:

Tiny leaf hairs on the globe mallow are an eye irritant, which is probably why they are also called sore-eye poppies or pink-eye poppies. These hairs are thought to discourage herbivores from eating the plant.

OCOTILLO



IDENTIFYING FEATURES:

Ocotillo (*Fouquieria splendens*) are one of the easiest plants to identify in the desert. They are a large shrub with long cane-like unbranched spiny stems that grow from a short trunk. Small 2 inch leaves will grow from the stems when there is enough moisture. Dense clusters of red tubular flowers grow from the end of the stems from March through June.

HABITAT:

Ocotillo are common in most areas of the Sonoran and Chihuahuan deserts. They are also found in western Texas through to southern California.



LIFE SPAN:

There is much discussion on exactly how old Ocotillo can live. A good estimate is 60 years although some studies indicate they can live well over 100 years.

SIZE:

Ocotillo can reach heights of up to 20 feet.

QUICK FACTS:

The Ocotillo is called many different names including Candlewood, Slimwood, Coachwhip, Vine Cactus, Flaming Sword and Jacob's Staff.

The Ocotillo is often used as "fencing" because its spines stop people and animals from passing through.

PRICKLY PEAR CACTUS



IDENTIFYING FEATURES:

The Engelmann prickly pear cactus (*Opuntia engelmannii*) can be easily identified by its broad, flat, green pads. The white spines are 3 inches long and can be flat, curved or straight. They also are covered with tiny, barbed hairs known as glochids. Groups of up to 6 spines emerge from a common center area known as areole's, which are scattered around each pad. The flowers are yellow and emerge in May-June. Ripe fruits are found beginning in July and are identified by their bright red color.

HABITAT:

Prickly pears are found growing in washes, rocky hillsides, around boulders and in areas where the soil is sandy or gravelly.



RANGE:

The Englemann variety of prickly pear can be found over much of the desert southwest from central Texas through inland southern California. Their range extends into northern Baja California and into central Sonora, Mexico.

LIFE SPAN:

They are known to live well over 20 years.

SIZE:

There are several different varieties of prickly pear cactus each growing to different sizes. The most common species in the Sonoran Desert is the Engelmann prickly pear which grows up to 5 feet tall and grow to a width of 10-15 feet.

QUICK FACTS:

The red fruit or pear of this cactus are also known as “tuna”.

Prickly pear are the state cactus of Texas.

Packrats often build dens at the base of these plants, which then provides protection from some of its predators.

SAGUARO CACTUS



IDENTIFYING FEATURES:

The saguaro cactus (*Carnegiea gigantea*) is one of the defining plants of the Sonoran Desert. These plants are large, tree-like columnar cacti that develop branches (or arms) as they age, although some never grow arms. These arms generally bend upward and can number over 25. Saguaros are covered with protective spines, white flowers in the late spring, and red fruit in summer.

HABITAT:

Saguaros are found exclusively in the Sonoran Desert. The most important factors for growth are water and temperature. If the elevation is too high, the cold weather and frost can kill the saguaro. Although the Sonoran Desert experiences both winter and summer rains, it is thought that the Saguaro obtains most of its moisture during the summer rainy season.



RANGE:

You find this cactus in southern Arizona and western Sonora, Mexico. At the northern portion of their range they are more plentiful on the warmer south facing slopes. A few stray plants can also be found in southeast California.

WILD STATUS:

The saguaro is not currently listed as threatened or endangered. Arizona has strict regulations about the harvesting, collection or destruction of this species.

LIFE SPAN:

With the right growing conditions, it is estimated that saguaros can live to be as much as 150-200 years old.

SIZE:

Saguaro are very slow growing cactus. A 10 year old plant might only be 1.5 inches tall. Saguaro can grow to be between 40-60 feet tall. When rain is plentiful and the saguaro is fully hydrated it can weigh between 3200-4800 pounds.

QUICK FACTS:

The saguaro is largest cactus in the United States. Most of the saguaros roots are only 4-6 inches deep and radiate out as far from the plant as it is tall. There is one deep root, or tap root that extends down into the ground more than 2 feet. After the saguaro dies its woody ribs can be used to build roofs, fences and furniture.

SUMMER POPPY



IDENTIFYING FEATURES:

The flowers of the summer poppy (*Kallstroemia grandiflora*) grow up to 2.5 inch wide and have 5 petals with dark orange bases and veins. In some of their growing areas the flowers are pink instead of orange. The leaves are opposite and compound with paired, oval leaflets. The stems are hairy.

HABITAT:

These flowers are especially noticeable along roadsides during the summer. They are found in sandy soils in washes, slopes, hillsides and grasslands.

RANGE:

Summer poppies can be found growing in both the Sonoran Desert and the Chihuahuan Desert.



LIFE SPAN:

Summer poppies are annual plants. This means that they germinate, flower and die within one year.

SIZE:

They can grow to be 3 feet tall.

QUICK FACTS:

Summer poppy seeds can remain dormant in the soil for many years. They will germinate when the moisture and temperature are correct, but this may not be until they have been in the ground for at least two years.