

The Cactus

A true cactus is part of just one family of plants (with up to 2000 species) that are also classified as succulents. Confusingly, all cacti are succulents, however not all succulents are cacti!

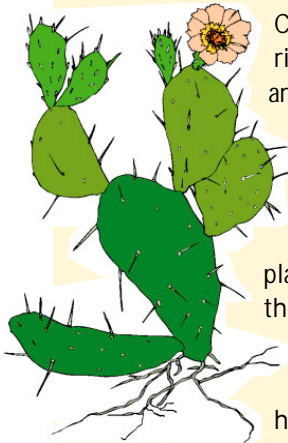
Succulents are plants that grow in hot or dry places where few other plants could survive and have evolved many clever ways in which to reduce water-loss.

Cacti originate mainly from the Americas, though they have now been introduced to warm countries in Europe and to Australia (where one species is now a serious pest). A few species can be found in Africa and Asia.



Golden Barrel (*Echinocactus grusonii*), also known as Mother-in-law's Cushion!

Photo courtesy of Ala CC-BY-SA-2.5



Cacti have clusters of spines that emerge from ridges or bumps. These create a micro-climate around the plant that helps trap moisture from dew, and also serve as protection against grazing animals.

All succulents have waxy skin that directs any rainfall directly down the stem of the plant to its roots and prevents evaporation from the flesh within.

Water is stored for long periods inside the enlarged, fleshy stem, and gathered with the help of a shallow but far-reaching root system.

By Jenna Poole

A giant amongst Cacti

The largest species of cacti is the Saguaro Cactus of North and South America. It averages 15m tall and holds a record of over 17m.

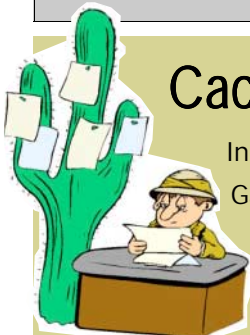


Photo courtesy of Leonard G. CC-BY-SA-1.0

A plant with a night-life!

Cacti only open their pores (to take in carbon dioxide and release oxygen as part of the photosynthesis process) at night. This reduces the risk of evaporation that would occur if pores were opened during the heat of the day. The carbon dioxide is then stored in chemical form until the daytime when it can be converted through photosynthesis (for which sunlight is essential) into energy.

Also, some species flower only at night. This is because they are pollinated by nocturnal animals such as moths and bats.



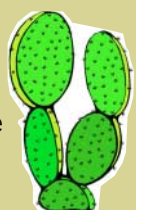
Cacti and people

In many countries, cacti are used to construct a living fence for livestock.

Gardeners and plant collectors have long been interested in cacti and succulents for their unusual form and often large and beautiful flowers. Why not try growing one yourself?

They do not need as much watering as other plants and definitely do not need to be walked as often as a dog!

One species of cactus produces a delicious fruit and is known as the prickly pear. This plant is also grown widely in Mexico as the host plant for a beetle that is used to produce a valuable red dye.



Prickly Pear