

CACTUS



cactus, any plant of the family Cactaceae, a large group of succulents found almost entirely in the New World. A cactus plant is conspicuous for its fleshy green stem, which performs the functions of leaves (commonly insignificant or absent), and for the spines (not always present) of various colors, shapes, and arrangements. Cactus flowers are notably delicate in appearance although usually large and showy; they are commonly yellow, white, or shades of red and purple. Many species are pollinated by bats. Cactus fruits are berries and are usually edible. A cactus plant appears on the coat of arms of Mexico, and the blossom of the giant cactus, or saguaro (*Cereus giganteus*), is the state flower of Arizona.

The plants vary from small, round globes to epiphytes, vines, and large treelike forms. The reduced leaf surface, the enlarged fleshy stem,

which is well fitted to store water and to retain it, and the ramified and extensive root system (much reduced in cultivated cacti) make the plant particularly adapted to regions of high temperature and long dry periods. Cacti are not restricted to desert regions, however, for in America they range from the tropics into Canada.

Most cacti bloom in the spring for a very short period, sometimes for only a few hours. The blossoms are noticeably sensitive to light, and often different species blossom only at specific times of the day. One of the most famous of the cacti is the night-blooming cereus usually classified as

Selenicereus or *C. grandiflora* (several other night-blooming cactus species bear the same common name). Its fragrant blossoms unfold at a visible rate after sunset and last only a single night. In many of its native habitats the flowering of this cactus is celebrated with festivals.



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