

Title: In Desert, Helping Save Prickly Victims of Development
Author(s): [Patricia Leigh Brown](#)
Source: [The New York Times](#). (Apr. 14, 2006): News: pA18(L).
Document Type: Article
[The New York Times](#)

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2006 The New York Times Company
<http://www.nytimes.com>
Full Text:

The operation began military-style at the crack of dawn. Bearing welders' gloves, shovels and tweezers for medical emergencies, the brigade of 40 moved across the desert, undaunted by rattlers, in single-minded pursuit of their well-defended targets.

It was the 141st mission of the **Cactus** Rescue Crew, and its challenge could be seen nearby, where whirling sprinklers signaled another "championship golf fairway" under construction, another "active adult master-planned community" in progress.

That would soon bring extensive "blading" -- clearing for development -- to this spot outside Tucson populated by baby **saguaro**s, lurching barrels and spiny clumps of hedgehogs.

In this booming state, second only to Nevada in population growth, the citizens' brigade was organized out of concern that plants on vast swaths of the Sonora Desert were vanishing. The **cactus** rescuers, volunteers all, have pioneered a novel approach to sprawl, swooping in at the 11th hour to save the desert flora from the bulldozer.

"It's the memory of the land and the fact that you preserve it yourself," said Dr. Carl J. Pergam, a radiologist, as he deftly lassoed string around the fine thorns on a prickly pear.

"It takes 60 or 80 years for a **saguaro** to grow an arm," Dr. Pergam said of another rescued baby **cactus**. "So I've saved a life, in essence."

The group was organized six years ago by the Tucson **Cactus** and Succulent Society. Since then, it has rescued over 27,000 cactuses and other native plants from road widenings, subdivisions, golf courses and shopping malls. At La Encantada in Tucson, stores like Tommy Bahama have displaced the exotic *Ferocactus wislizeni* barrel cactuses with their orange flowers and fishhook prongs.

It has inspired kindred groups in Phoenix and Lake Havasu City. Tucson, mandated by the state to curtail water use, now plants rescued cactuses rather than wetland plants in highway medians.

Masters of the art of extricating spines from skin with the flick of a credit card, members of the group learn of property destined for the bulldozer when developers apply for county permits to clear the land. Some developers have even become allies, considering it good public relations to tip off rescuers before land is graded.

The Southern Arizona Home Builders Association has endorsed the rescuers, who sign liability waivers. "There is going to be growth," said Ed Taczanowsky, the association's president, who is a member of the rescue crew. "It's a way to co-exist."

In many ways, the **cactus** rescue is a savvy response to strict local ordinances protecting native plants and reflects a movement in the Southwest toward regionally appropriate, drought-tolerant gardening, sometimes called xeriscaping.

In Pima County, which includes Tucson, developers are required to inventory noteworthy desert plants and to keep 80 percent of all **saguaro**s over 16 feet high, though they may be relocated. The statuesque cactuses, whose blooms are the state flower, are governed by a preservation formula so complex that the county provides a "**cactus** spread sheet" for developers, said Daniel Signor, the county's senior planner.

Transplanting mature **saguaro**s, accomplished by professional salvagers using hydraulic equipment, is tricky business, often resulting in protracted death for the plant. "It's like an elderly person breaking an arm," said Michael Reimer, the special investigator for the state's Agricultural Department, who monitors **cactus** transport and theft. "They don't heal fast."

In Tucson proper, it is illegal to "deface, maim, damage or disfigure any protected native plant." That is where the rescuers come in. With the cooperation of developers, they preserve hundreds of smaller **saguaro**s, barrels, ocotillos, hedgehogs, pincushions and other plants that, while perhaps not garden magazine centerfold material, form the "ephemeral, unheralded texture" of the desert, and cover for birds and animals, said Margaret Livingstone, an associate professor of landscape architecture at the University of Arizona.

"Much like Frederick Law Olmsted formed an emerald necklace of parks," Ms. Livingstone said, "the rescuers are creating an arid **cactus** necklace around the city."

Rescuers keep some **cactus** for their own gardens but sell most at minimal cost. People line up for comely Mammillaria, like so many Ralph Lauren sheets at a Macy's white sale. The proceeds can help pay for school science fair projects involving cactuses or succulents and public **cactus** gardens.

The group is adept at finding the desert's most elusive treasures, among them, "the Queen of the Night," the Desert Night-Blooming Cereus. Once a year at night, the plant, which is shaped like a forked stick, breaks out in huge white flowers with a dazzling scent.

"It epitomizes what's special about the desert," said Jessie Byrd, a 27-year-old landscape student and rescuer, cradling one she had delicately extracted.

The rescue group sells a small **saguaro** for \$5, versus \$1,500 for a mature specimen in a nursery. But they do more than save plants.

"They're drawing attention to the desert being developed at a fairly rapid rate," said Mark A. Dimmitt, director of natural history for the Center for Sonora Desert Studies at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum.

The majority of newcomers to Arizona "care about the human impact on the environment, but they still want golf courses," said Rita Maguire, president of ThinkAZ, a public policy research institute in Phoenix. She compared the area between Phoenix and Tucson to Orange County, Calif., which she said was evolving into "a continuous sea of homes."

Two years ago, concern about disappearing desert in Pima County led to the passage of a \$174 million bond issue to buy open land for conservation and to a plan to cluster development in less environmentally sensitive areas.

Some cities are beginning to offer homeowners and businesses financial incentives for pulling up lawn and putting in approved low-water-use plants. The city of Scottsdale, for example, recently began a successful "turf removal rebate" of 25 cents a square foot, up to a maximum of \$1,500.

But xeriscaping has had unintended consequences. Nonnative African grasses introduced for drought-tolerant landscaping have begun to invade desert areas. Last year was the state's biggest fire season, fueled in part by invasive grasses, said Travis Bean, a research specialist at the University of Arizona's School of Natural Resources.

"Like Hansel and Gretel, you could follow the trail of grasses up the washes to neighborhoods with xeriscaped yards," Mr. Bean said. Sonoran vegetation does not spread fire because of the bare ground between plants, he said.

The **cactus** rescuers cherish the scruffy idiosyncrasy of their quarry as they go about their task. By noon, they had rescued 655 specimens, including 284 barrels and 292 hedgehogs, their pick-up trucks and car trunks transformed into veritable Noah's arks for **cactus**.

"Out here you see variations, **cactus** spines that are twisted, fatter, thinner," said Richard M. Weidhopf, the group's president and assistant dean at the College of Pharmacy at the University of Arizona. "In a nursery, plants often come from a single seed. It's as if everybody was blonde and 5-foot-6."

Inspired by the Tucson group, Jan Emmring, 37, a landscaper, recently formed a **cactus** rescue crew in Lake Havasu City.

"A rose bush could be anywhere," Mr. Emmring said. "But if you see a big **saguaro** standing in the full sun, you know where you are."

CAPTION(S):

Photos: Louise Kaufman examining a small pincushion **cactus** at a sale. The plant had been rescued from a development site the day before.; Steve Buscay tagging a **cactus** at a site near Tucson scheduled for development. The **Cactus** Rescue Crew keeps some plants and sells others. (Photographs by Chris Richards for The New York Times)

By PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN

Source Citation (MLA 7th Edition)

Brown, Patricia Leigh. "In Desert, Helping Save Prickly Victims of Development." *New York Times* 14 Apr. 2006: A18(L). *Expanded Academic ASAP*. Web. 28 July 2013.

Document URL

<http://0-go.galegroup.com.albuq.cabq.gov/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA144469488&v=2.1&u=apl&it=r&p=EAIM&sw=w>

Gale Document Number: GALE|A144469488

[Top of page](#)