

Under Annotated

Computer chips to be used to foil cactus thieves.

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TUCSON, Arizona (AP) -- Anyone thinking of stealing a saguaro cactus from the Arizona desert could soon be hauling off more than just a giant plant.

U.S. National Park Service officials plan to imbed microchips in Arizona's signature plant to protect them from thieves, who rip them from the desert to sell them to landscapers, nurseries and homeowners.

The primary objective is deterrence, but the chips would also aid in tracking down and identifying stolen saguaros, said Bob Love, chief ranger at southern Arizona's Saguaro National Park.

"There's probably more of it that occurs than we're aware of," Love said.

Last year, 17 saguaros were dug up and stashed for transportation later. The culprits were caught, Love said. In other cases, three to five plants have been taken at a time.

Saguaros are unique to the Sonoran Desert, 120,000 square miles covering portions of Arizona, California and the northern Mexican states of Baja California and Sonora.

They're majestic giants that can grow to heights of 50 feet, sprout gaggles of arms and weigh several tons. They can take 50 years to flower and 70 years before sprouting an arm. And they help identify Arizona's landscape in everything from Roadrunner cartoons to the back of the state quarter.

A 2000 census of Saguaro National Park, a 91,000-acre park outside Tucson, estimated there were 1.3 million saguaros.

The number of saguaros statewide is anyone's guess. "How many stars are there in the sky?" said Jim McGinnis, who supervises the Arizona Department of Agriculture's office of special investigations.

Plant pilferers typically target the relatively young and small specimens in the 4- to 7-foot range which are probably 30 to 50 years old. Plants of that size typically fit in the bed of a pickup truck; bigger ones require heavy equipment to lift and larger vehicles to haul them.

They typically can fetch \$1,000 or more.

"Saguaros are the plant that gets the most money," McGinnis said. "Everybody wants a saguaro in their front yard."

Officials at Saguaro National Park are now planning the microchip project, which must first undergo a lengthy environmental compliance study to ensure the chips don't harm the plants themselves or create air quality, soil or endangered species issues, said Love, the park ranger.

Under the program, a microchip like those implanted to identify dogs and other pets would be inserted an inch deep into the plant with a large syringe. The microchips do not emit a signal. Instead, each is uniquely encoded, and waving a special wand within about a foot powers the chip to send back its code.

Love said it was common to see trucks carrying cactus on roads that intersect the park. "So if we saw something like that, we could momentarily stop them and wave these wands over them," he said.

Officials could also check the saguaros being sold at nurseries or landscape businesses to see if they came from the park, "particularly if we knew that a theft had occurred," he said.

There's federal precedent for cactus-chipping. The Lake Mead National Recreation Area in Arizona and Nevada began putting microchips in barrel cactuses in 1999 after getting reports of poaching from park visitors.

"Not only has it helped us with reducing the level of cactus that's being poached, but it also has helped us with cataloging our resources within the park," said Lake Mead spokesman Andrew Munoz.

The microchips cost about \$4 to \$4.50 each. Wands or scanners to read them range from \$500 to \$2,500, Love said. Other costs would include labor

needed to insert the chips and monitor for cactus thefts.

"We would likely not just go out and implant, but would gather data, GPS the locations, and record heights and widths and measures," Love said.

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