

Prickly Plants Attract Sticky Fingers

Calif. City Takes Action Against Cactus Thieves

BY DAVID KELLY
Los Angeles Times

PALM DESERT, Calif. — Someone is swiping the cactuses in this upscale desert city.

Over the past six months, there has been an epidemic of thefts. City officials say they have lost nearly \$20,000 worth of cactuses. The main target is the golden barrel, which, depending on the size, can fetch from \$100 to \$800 each.

The problem is so bad that surveillance cameras have gone up near large concentrations of the cactuses, and authorities expect to implant microchips into the barrels soon.

"Each microchip has a scannable bar code that tells who owns it," Police Lt. Frank Taylor said. "The odds are that we won't microchip every plant, but it will have a deterrent effect."

A few years ago, this city of golf resorts and retirees began shedding its lush grass and artificial turf for a landscape more in keeping with its austere, sun-blasted environment.

Out went the phony greenery and over-watered lawns. In came sand, succulents, cactuses and other hot-weather plants. Median strips around town and public spaces soon were studded with spiny, twisted flora.

"The city decided to stop apologizing for the desert and said, 'We live in the desert; it is what it is,'" city landscape manager Spencer Knight said.

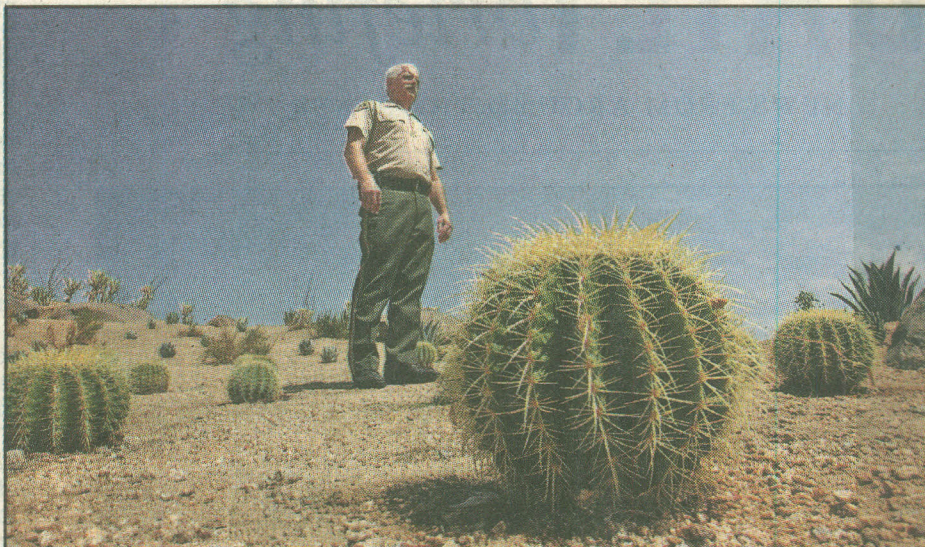
But with the transformation nearly complete, the thefts began.

The city's visitor center lost 50 cactuses in one night, and criminals have hit private property as well.

"They have a very shallow root system and can be popped out pretty easily," Taylor said of the cactuses. "People have been digging them up in broad daylight."

Palm Desert isn't the only place targeted by thieves, who often resell their booty to landscapers and nurseries.

Saguaro National Park, near Tucson, Ariz., recently had 17 large saguaros taken.



IRFAN KHAN/LOS ANGELES TIMES/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Lt. Frank Taylor, assistant police chief, is surrounded by freshly planted golden barrel cactus at the under-construction Henderson Community Center in Palm Desert, Calif., in July. The city is upset over recent cactus thefts and has installed cameras to discourage thieves from stealing expensive plants.

"In some cases, the thieves work for landscapers, and, in other cases, they are independent contractors who sell the saguaro to legitimate commercial operations," said Chief Ranger Bob Love. "Depending on the size and shape or if it has arms, they sell for anywhere from \$500 to \$5,000 or more each."

Desert plant pilfering has a long history in California. Joshua Tree National Park was founded in 1936 largely because Minerva Hoyt of Pasadena was so appalled at the rampant cactus and Joshua tree theft in the area that she dedicated her life to saving desert flora.

"This park was established to preserve plants," said Cindy Von Halle, supervisory ranger at Joshua Tree, which is now a national park. "We don't have a problem with thefts anymore — maybe because we have armed rangers patrolling everywhere."

Outside the visitor center in Palm Desert, city landscape inspector Brad Chuck looked over a collection of golden barrels that had been stolen, recovered and replanted.

"I can't believe they are still here," he said, a surveillance camera above him trained on the area. "These are prob-

ably worth \$150 or \$200 each. I think the economy is driving a lot of this. If it isn't nailed down, they are going to take it."

Chuck said the thefts began increasing last year. Agaves and Mexican fan palms have also been taken. He said thieves sometimes dress like city workers to steal plants in the middle of the day.

"I think there is a demand for them," he said. "We are trying to be in the forefront of water-wise planting and are cutting down on our lush vegetation. A lot of people are getting away from lawns and turf in favor of desert landscaping. A golden barrel 3 or 4 feet across is worth \$4,500 or more. You pay by the inch."

In some cases, entire median strips have been picked clean.

Knight said the city wants a more natural, eco-friendly environment. It initially imported plants from the Sonoran Desert, such as saguaros, but the Coachella Valley is too dry to sustain them. Eventually, the city turned to native plants and those capable of surviving baking summers — oleander and lantana, for example.