



Benjie Sanders, The Arizona Daily Star

A woodpecker samples some early blossoms

Saguaro blossoms paint desert earlier than usual

By Douglas Kreutz
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Saguaro cacti are bursting into bloom in the Tucson valley — just as they do every year in May.

This, of course, is April.

"The saguaros are definitely beginning to bloom earlier than usual this year," said Mark Dimmitt, curator of plants at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum.

"I presume it's because of the unusual heat we've been having," Dimmitt said. "The things that trigger flowering are water, day length and temperature."

"We haven't had much in the way of rain, and the day length obviously hasn't changed from previous years — so that leaves temperature. That's the only thing

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that has been abnormal this year."

Dimmitt said saguaro blossoms began appearing in abundance last week — about three weeks earlier than usual.

"A 20-year observation indicates they usually start early in May," he said. "But I'd say about 5 percent of the plants have flowers already, and some of them are in full bloom."

"A lot of the others are in bud. They'll be very noticeable in about a week. . . . It's hard to say when they will be at their peak, but certainly for the next four or five weeks, there will be lots of plants in flower."

Dimmitt said the early blooming of saguaros probably won't have an effect on pollination — but it could indirectly affect germination of new plants.

Saguaros commonly are pollinated by a rare species of bat known as Sanborn's long-nosed bat, Dimmitt said.

"These are tropical, nectar-feeding bats that migrate up here from southern Mexico just during the time saguaros are in flower," he said.

The bats are listed as an endangered species. Destruction of their natural habitat has led to their decline.

"But this doesn't seem to be affecting saguaros because the bats are not the only ones pollinating saguaros. Honeybees, and also birds such as doves and woodpeckers and orioles, all love nectar and are pretty good pollinators."

"And in general, when a plant flowers early, it means the pollinators are out early," Dimmitt said.

He said the early flowering could affect germination because it is likely to cause saguaros to produce fruit earlier than usual.

"Saguaros have evolved so that the fruit ripens and releases seeds just before the summer rains come in early July," he said.

"Various animals have a real appetite for these seeds," Dimmitt continued. "The seeds are eaten by ants, rodents and birds such as sparrows, finches and cardinals."

"If the saguaros ripen their fruits three weeks early, and the rains begin in early July as usual, then presumably more of the seeds would be eaten by the various animals. But it would be pretty difficult to measure the effect of something like that, and if we have a good rainy season, there should still be enough seeds for an effective germination."

The season of saguaro blooms normally lasts from early May until late June, Dimmitt said.