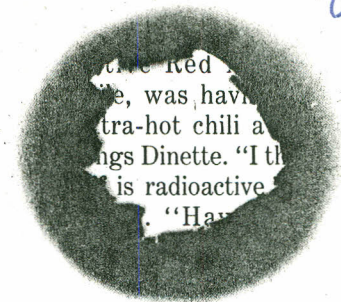


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Black-Market Cactuses

Because of their size and distinctive, telephone-pole shape, saguaro cactuses have become one of the hottest lawn decorations in the American Southwest.

But many of these plants also are "hot" in a different way. All saguaros are protected by law, so modern-day bandits have taken to digging them up, often from government-owned land, and selling them illegally. "It's like stealing a car. It's the same thing with a saguaro," says Larry M. Richards, native-plant law specialist at the Arizona Commission of Agriculture and Horticulture in Phoenix.

Outside Arizona (the only state where saguaros grow naturally), the average re-

tail value for a saguaro is \$25 a foot, with an additional \$50 to \$100 for each arm.

Last year, about 200 people were fined or issued warnings for digging up protected plants in Arizona. Three-quarters of those plants were saguaros. Such thefts are on the rise this year.

Armed with permits, landscapers can take saguaros legally from "disturbed areas," such as road-construction sites. Illegal traffickers, however, face fines of as much as \$10,000 for a second offense.

Why not plant a seedling? "If you plant a six-inch saguaro, your grandkids might see some growth," says Richards. "It's not like a tree." —Thaddeus Rutkowski

JENNIFER HEWITSON

