

Thieves selling rare saguaros at high prices

By Douglas Kreutz
The Arizona Daily Star

Cactus thieves are plundering Arizona's population of a rare, possibly mutant type of saguaro and selling the exotic plants for up to \$15,000 apiece on the black market, a state official said yesterday.

"There's such a high demand for these things that we are facing a serious problem with thefts from both public and private land," said Larry Richards, Arizona's native plant law specialist.

"We don't know how many have been stolen in the past year . . . but we're definitely seeing an increase in thefts," said Richards, who is known informally as the state's "cactus cop."

"People want them because they're so rare," he said. "If a person wants one of these cactuses badly enough, he'll pay maybe \$5,000, maybe \$10,000 or maybe \$15,000 for it. . . . There was a dealer up in Nevada that had one for sale for \$15,000."

The rare plants, known as cristate saguaros or crested saguaros, are mature cacti that begin to grow in a broad fan shape instead of continuing to develop a characteristic long trunk and curving limbs.

Mark Dimmitt, curator of plants at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, said botanists don't know what causes a saguaro to develop a crest.

"All we can say is that it's an abnormal growth in which the growing point becomes a growing line and keeps spreading out in a fan shape," Dimmitt said. "And that fan shape can become convoluted and get some pretty weird shapes."

Dimmitt said the common belief that cristate saguaros are mutants is not necessarily true.

"If it were a mutation, that would mean it was genetically based," he said. "We don't know if it's a mutation. If it were, you could grow new plants from the



—David Sanders, The Arizona Daily Star

A cristate saguaro on University of Arizona campus

seeds of a crested saguaro and get at least a proportion of (offspring) crested plants.

"As far as I know, nobody's done that. It would take about 50 years, given the saguaro's slow rate of growth."

Dimmitt said other possible causes of cristate saguaros include bacterial disease and severe frost damage, which might cause a cactus to develop an abnormal growth pattern.

Richards described cristate saguaros as "very rare," but he said state officials have no firm estimate of the state's cristate population.

"At this time, from what I've

seen and what we have on record, there are under 100 cristates that we know of," he said. "But there could be others."

Richards, who noted that a state permit is needed to remove a cristate saguaro legally from public or private land, declined to comment in detail on investigations that are in progress because suspects have not been cited or prosecuted yet.

"We do know that some stolen cristate plants have gone out of state," he said. "We believe a lot of them are being shipped to Texas, California, Nevada and Kansas."

"We are investigating a situa-

See **SAGUAROS**, Page 2B

Saguaros

Continued from Page 1B

tion now in which two or three individuals, working closely together, have taken approximately 17 cristate saguaros."

He said eventual prosecution of the cases under investigation "depends on jurisdiction because it's a multiagency involvement. Three or four different agencies are interested in prosecution."

Penalties for cactus theft, which is a misdemeanor, include fines up to \$500 and up to 30 days in jail for a first offense by an individual, Richards said. He said penalties for an enterprise or business guilty of cactus theft include fines up to \$10,000 and up to 30 days in jail for a first offense.

Repeat offenses are punishable by fines of up to \$500 per plant, Richards said.

Richards said investigators be-

lieve some cacti are smuggled out of state in enclosed trucks and that others are transported on the basis of falsified permits.

He said the Arizona Commission of Agriculture and Horticulture, which is responsible for native plant protection and permits, is compiling a photographic record of the state's cristate saguaro population.

"When we are made aware that a cristate exists, we will go out and photograph it from about four different angles," he said. "We will map it and record it, and then it goes on file. This includes cristates on public and private land.

"We're asking that anybody who knows the location of a cristate saguaro contact us so we can photograph it, map it and record it. We're hoping for a lot of help from the public and landowners in this battle to keep these plants in Arizona."

Richards said people with information on cristate saguaros may contact him in Phoenix at 1-542-4373.