

Saguaro Cactus Reading Comprehension

Name _____

The hot cruel sun of the desert beats down on long prickly arms that extend skyward from tall green trunks. Here in the Sonoran Desert, located on the border of the United States and Mexico, the air is dry and every drop of water is fought for viciously. In this arid climate, saguaro cacti battle for survival.

Every part of the cactus helps the plant gather and keep what little water is available. Unlike trees, which often have roots extending dozens of feet underground to reach deep reserves of water, saguaro cacti have very short roots that spread out wide to better capture rainwater. The trunk of the cactus is corrugated, or folded, almost like an accordion. When the cactus is full of water, the trunk can expand to store water for use in drier times. The waxy green surface of the cactus' trunk prevents the cactus from drying out and losing the water stored within.

Many species of cacti have similar methods of storing water in dry climates. The saguaro cactus is unique, however, in its incredible size and growth. Scientists think that saguaro cacti can live to be up to 200 years old. Cacti this old can be more than 40 feet tall and weigh more than a car. Despite this impressive size, saguaro cacti start from humble beginnings. The cactus begins life under the shade of a desert tree, called a nurse tree, that will shield it from the hot sun and from the hungry glances of animals. At ten years old, the saguaro is only about the size of a thumb. As the little cactus grows larger and larger, it begins to demand more water from the soil. Soon, the nurse tree that sheltered the young plant is deprived of water and dies.

As the saguaro grows, it becomes a source of food and shelter for a multitude of desert creatures. Although the prickly spines of the cactus deter animals while the cactus is young, as the saguaro ages, the spines spread out. This allows the first brave explorer, the Gila woodpecker, to approach the trunk. The woodpecker bores a hole in the trunk to make its home. In following years, owls, finches, and sparrows will use the hole to raise their young. When the saguaro matures and begins to produce flowers, bats will visit by night to eat the sweet nectar. In the summertime, the saguaro fruit becomes a tasty snack for many reptiles, insects, and mammals. In times of drought, rodents, deer and sheep will eat chunks of the cactus' water-filled trunk to quench their thirst. Young cacti can even be found sprouting within the sheltered cavities, or holes, in the trunks of older saguaro. In the harsh environment of the Sonoran Desert, the strong saguaro is an oasis of life.

1. According to the paragraph 1, what could be the meaning of the word

“arid”?

- a.) Lively
- b.) Dry
- c.) Empty
- d.) Windy

2. Why do trees have roots that are different than the roots of cacti?

- a.) The roots of cacti are made to survive very hot conditions while tree roots do not have to survive such hot conditions
- b.) The roots of trees need to support the heavy weight of the tree while the roots of cacti do not have to support such heavy weights
- c.) The roots of trees are made to reach water deep underground while cacti roots are made to spread out and collect surface rainwater
- d.) Trees have plenty of water and nutrients to grow large roots while cacti can only manage to grow small roots

3. According to the information in paragraph 2, what might happen to a cactus if you took away the waxy green surface of the trunk?

- a.) The cactus would overheat and might die
- b.) The cactus would be more likely to be attacked by animals and diseases
- c.) The cactus would collapse as it will not be able to support itself
- d.) The cactus would lose the water it stored in its trunk

- 4. Which feature does the saguaro cacti share with many other species of cacti?**
- a.) Height of more than 40 feet tall
 - b.) Extremely long lifespan
 - c.) Corrugated trunk for storing water
 - d.) Weight greater than the weight of a car
- 5. What role does the Gila woodpecker play in the life of the saguaro?**
- a.) The woodpecker creates a hole that many animals will use
 - b.) The woodpecker eats the nectar of the cactus fruit
 - c.) The woodpecker removes the prickly spines of the cactus
 - d.) The woodpecker eats the trunk of the cactus during droughts
- 6. Which of the options below would be the best choice as a subheading for the final paragraph?**
- a.) Prickly Protection: The Spines of the Saguaro Cactus
 - b.) Hidden Water in Times of Drought
 - c.) Cozy Home for Many Species
 - d.) Source of Life in the Desert
- 7. Which of the following plants or animals is negatively affected by the saguaro cactus?**
- a.) A nurse tree
 - b.) The Gila woodpecker
 - c.) Young cacti within trunk cavities
 - d.) Bats