

# LESSONS FROM CACTI

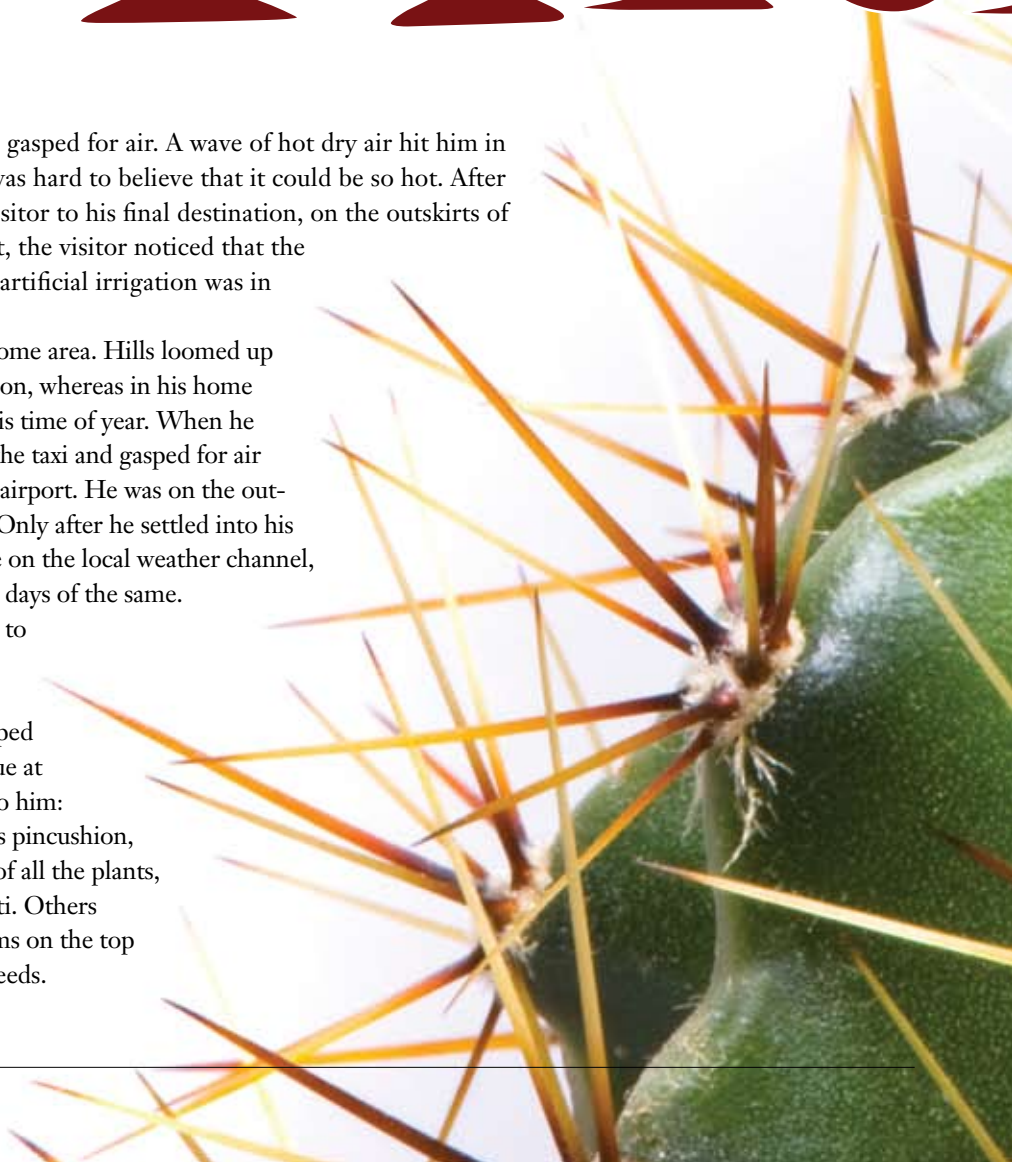
HOW TO  
SURVIVE  
THE

# Price

The visitor stepped off the airplane and gasped for air. A wave of hot dry air hit him in the face and took his breath away. It was hard to believe that it could be so hot. After leaving the airport the taxi took the visitor to his final destination, on the outskirts of the city. On the drive from the airport, the visitor noticed that the terrain was quite barren except for places that artificial irrigation was in use; those areas were lush and green.

The landscape was much different from his home area. Hills loomed up nearby that were pretty much barren of vegetation, whereas in his home area the trees and grass tended to be green at this time of year. When he reached his final destination, he stepped out of the taxi and gasped for air again. It was hotter here than it had been at the airport. He was on the outskirts of a desert and was to spend a week here. Only after he settled into his hotel room did he notice the temperature gauge on the local weather channel, 109 degrees Fahrenheit, with a forecast of more days of the same.

Once he had settled into his room he decided to take a walk around the hotel resort. Different types of plants greeted him, and as he wandered through the grounds he was greeted by odd shaped plants that had names engraved on a stone plaque at their base. The names were somewhat foreign to him: hedgehog, prickly pear, fish hook barrel, Miller's pincushion, night blooming cereus, and the most imposing of all the plants, the saguaro. The saguaro dwarfed the other cacti. Others had arms on them, and all seemed to have blooms on the top from whence birds were pecking the juice and seeds.





# Knives of Life

## DURING TOUGH TIMES

By | Alan S. Bigger, B.S., M.A., R.E.H., and Linda B. Bigger, B.A., B.S.

Being a person with an inquisitive nature, the visitor wondered, "How on earth do plants that are so large, live in a climate that seems so inhospitable?" He wandered further through the grounds and looked at the local hillside. The saguaro looked a little like humans, in different shapes and sizes, but how on earth did they survive? During the next few days he talked to people that were indigenous to the area and purchased a book titled *The Great Saguaro Book* by Susan Hazen-Hammond.

He discovered that it's possible to learn lessons for life from a cactus, if one can only get beyond the thorns, and that these lessons will assist one to survive during tough or prickly times! These plants survive under great stress of duress, day in and day out, yet in their splendor they can grow to over 50 feet high, weigh eight tons, and live to be well over 100 years old.

### CACTUS AND FACILITIES

Like the cacti in the desert there is no doubt that the facilities industry is going through some trying times and that we are all under a lot of stress. Hardly a day goes by without one hearing of a downsizing, rightsizing, hiring and travel freezes, or closing of operations. In addition, some in-house services continue to be outsourced at both the hourly and salaried employees' levels.

Frontline employees are expected to do more today than yesterday, and managers are expected to cut costs and increase productivity without any lapse in quality of service. In these times of stress and change there is much that we can learn from the saguaro that we can apply to our individual situations today, that will help us survive the prickles of life and help us to make it through tough economic times.

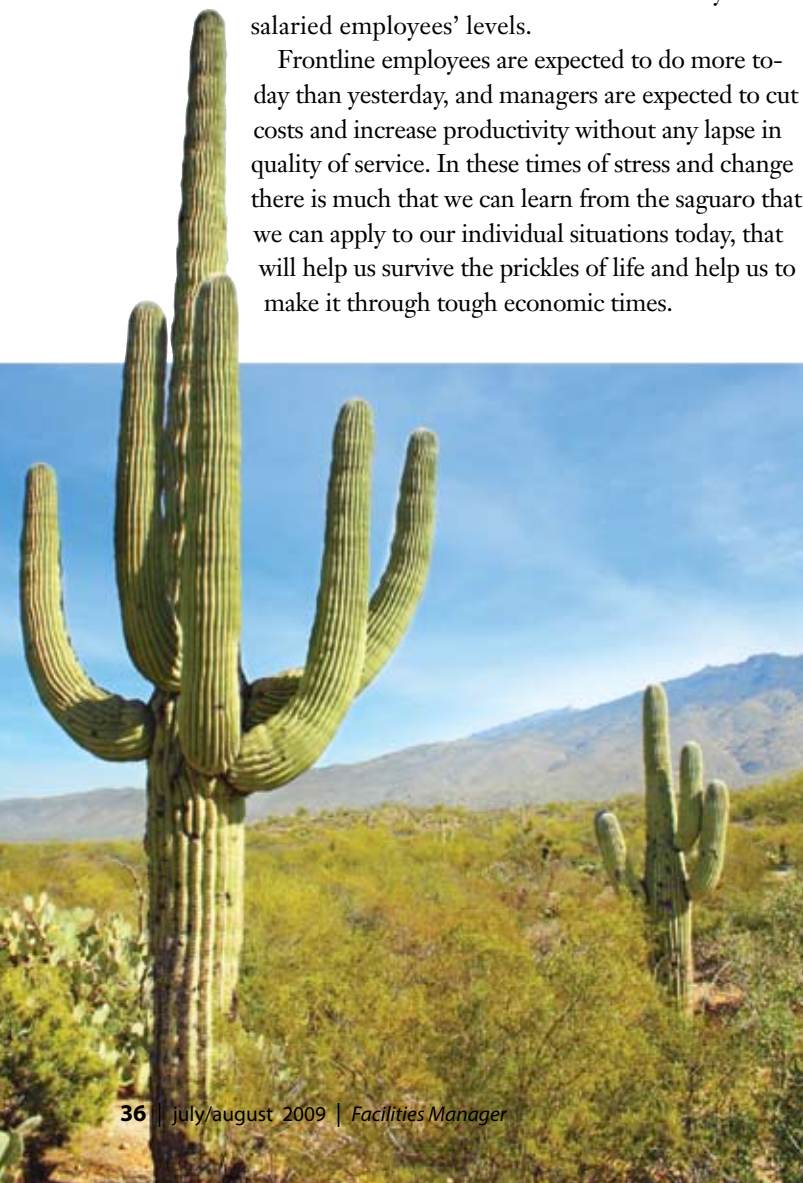
The saguaro survives because it is well prepared to survive dry and severe times of drought. It is a survivor. The roots of the saguaro radiate outwards from the plant as it grows, and if a saguaro grows to 50 feet, the root system will radiate outwards from the base of the saguaro an equivalent distance. This incredible root system acts as a net, and when it rains the system can capture upwards of 200 gallons of water during one rainfall. The saguaro saves for the future, much like a camel. During good times, the saguaro saves so that during times of drought it can survive. *The saguaro teaches us that one should plan for bad times, during good times.*

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Interestingly, as the visitor walked around and inspected some saguaro he noted that one needed to be careful when trying to touch the skin of the saguaro, as on each ridge in the skin there were some very sharp needles. As he looked closer he noticed little birds drilling in between the ridges without a care in the world, making their nests in the cool interior of the saguaro. The birds, he learned, would make the nests and later leave, then upon their departure other desert animals would take over the space. Even though the saguaro had prickles to protect itself, it did not become so prickly that birds could not live in its stems or on its top.

The birds played a vital role in distributing the seeds that they pecked off the flowers of the plant and distributing them to the wind. A critical function, without the dispersion of seed, the saguaro would not survive. So no matter whether times are good and there is plenty of water, or times are bad and there is no water, the saguaro has to rely on others for its survival such as the Gila woodpecker, white winged dove, gilded flicker, and javelina to spread their seeds. *The lesson is that the saguaro cannot survive without the help of others.*

The side of the saguaro is made up of ridges. These ridges are much like an accordion, except that on each protruding ridge there are sharp needles. This accordion-like skin provides a unique service to the saguaro. The saguaro must learn to expand and contract, to be flexible, no matter what the climatic conditions might bring. During times of rain, the saguaro drinks up the water through its root system and expands. The accordion-like ridges expand so that the saguaro can hold more water. When there is less water in the saguaro the ridges contract. If the saguaro could not flex with the times, when it drank a lot of



water it would burst! The saguaro teaches, through its accordion-like skin that *we must be flexible and adjust to the ever-changing conditions that life will bring us*. If we do not, we could “burst” from the stress of the times.

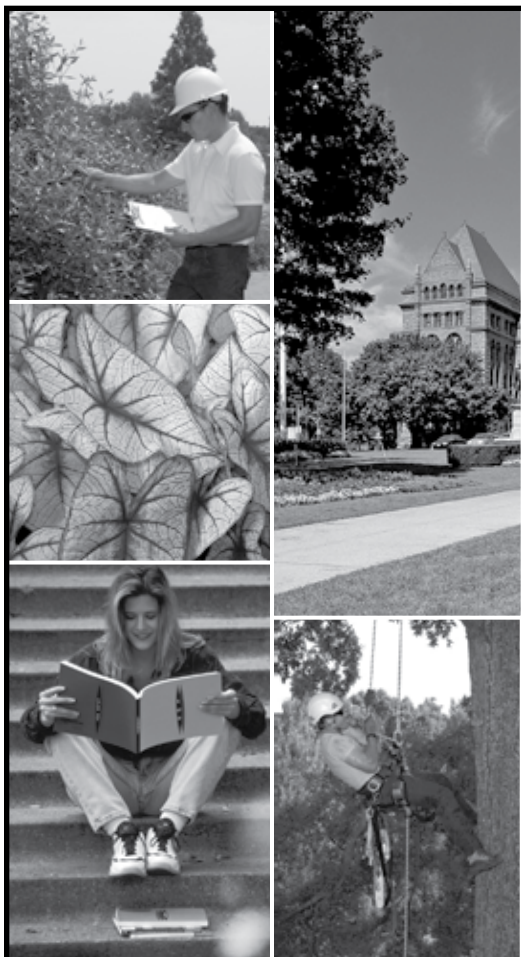
As the saguaro develops, it grows from a single-stemmed plant into one that may have one or more arms. As these develop, flowers appear on the tips of the arms. Therefore the chance of propagation of the species is enhanced by the saguaro having many arms with many flowers. This is no mean feat, as seemingly only one seed out of a hundreds germinates. The saguaro cannot become complacent and rest on the fact that it is the largest cactus in North America; it cannot afford to become complacent. If it becomes complacent—does not grow enough arms to disseminate seeds through its flowers—the saguaros will not survive.

This lesson is an important one as the saguaro is teaching us *to avoid complacency and to continue to grow*. The survival of the saguaro, and of you and I, depends on continued growth so that we avoid becoming complacent. In an article titled “Don’t get too comfy,” Robert McGarvey encourages readers to “Stretch beyond your comfort zone – before turbulent times force you to.” (*America Way*, May 15, 2002, p. 58). The saguaro has to constantly stretch itself to grow new flowers and arms to survive.

Do all saguaros survive? Certainly not! They are subject to the effects of drought, cold, pestilences, and diseases much as the human organism is. A saguaro often has upwards of 50 holes made by the Gila woodpeckers, and oftentimes seems to have as many holes as a Swiss cheese. What happens to the hundreds of gallons in the saguaro, does it leak out? Does the saguaro give up just because of these difficulties? Certainly not! If the skin splits from drought or the pecking of a bird, the saguaro’s natural defense mechanism seals off the edges of the damaged area so that valuable sap and juices do not leak out. With so many holes in it, it would seem that the saguaro would just give up, but it doesn’t.

Like the title of Willey Jolley’s book, *A Setback is a Setup for a Comeback*, the saguaro takes these setbacks in its stride and seeks to turn the setback of the woodpeckers and other predators into setup for a comeback, for it is the same predators that spread the seeds of the cactus so that saguaros will continue to thrive for all to see. The saguaro teaches us that *whatever may come our way, no matter how bad things may become, the challenges of the past prepare us for the possibilities of the future!*

The final lesson from the saguaro attests to its incredible tenacity in struggling to survive during the good times as well as the bad. Susan Hazen-Hammond wrote, “... the average life



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expectancy of a seedling is under six weeks, and fewer than one seedling in a hundred reaches its first birthday. At this point, one million seeds have produced only 51 established plants.” She indicates that the chances of survival for the saguaro are slender. But does the saguaro give up? Does it just run into hiding (which is hard for something over 50 feet to do)? No, it grows more arms, more flowers, more fruit, and this increases the probability of survival.

To survive, the saguaro must *work* at surviving, spread out its roots, grow arms, and spread its seeds. Likewise in life, growth both individually and professionally does not occur without work. J.W. Marriott, in his book *The Spirit to Serve*, uses a formula to illustrate the need for hard work to survive:

“No grunt work = no growth. No growth = no future.”

In order to survive, to grow, and to have a future, the saguaro must work at it. Likewise, *in order for individual and personal growth to occur we must work at it.*

#### APPLYING THE LESSONS OF THE SAGUARO

The saguaro was declared a national treasure with the opening in Arizona of the Saguaro National Park in 1933. Due to that effort and the incredible survivability of the saguaro, we will be able to enjoy the beauty and the lessons of the saguaro for many years to come. How do the lessons of the saguaro apply to our individual and professional lives on a daily basis?

- **Plan during good times for bad times.** From saving resources for the future to educating and reeducating ourselves on a daily basis we can prepare for the future. Work hard now and plan for the future and one of the best investments is to educate and reeducate oneself to prepare for ever-changing employment and market conditions.
- **Develop networks of friends and professionals in the field.** Take time to develop personal and professional friendships that will stand the test of time. There is probably nothing better than personal friendships and professional networking to help one survive these trying times. Much can be learned from others. Personal friendships



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can help you bear the burdens of life whereas professional friendships can help you find the possibilities in the future.

- **Be flexible.** Our jobs are changing, computers are here to stay, robots are becoming commonplace, and technological developments are increasing at a faster and faster pace. It seems that as soon as we learn a program or process, they change! Likewise in life and in business, the only certainty is change. By being flexible, like the ridges of the saguaro, we will be able to survive the changes and conditions.
- **Whatever challenges we may face are just preparing us for the possibilities of the future.** The key is to learn from the challenges that we go through and to apply the lessons in future situations. The burdens of today can become the blessings of tomorrow.
- **For individual or personal growth to occur, we must work at it.** The challenges that we face may require that we apply and extend ourselves. For instance, some persons may wish to get ahead or get a promotion, and may moan if they miss being selected due to the fact that they do not have a professional certification or a degree. Do not let this setback hold you back forever. Plan now and work now to receive that professional certification or a degree. It may be a lot of work now, but it will be the only way that you may

be able to get ahead in the future. Moaning about it will do nothing – working towards the goal and accomplishing the goal will help one prepare for and survive into the future.

As the visitor's stay in the desert began to wind down, he noticed that the weather did not seem as hot as when he arrived, but it was. He was walking around more with less effort than when he had arrived, and the scenery seemed incredibly beautiful. His body was beginning to adapt to the climate and his eyes were beginning to appreciate the beauty of the desert landscape. Colorful cacti abounded and the various birds sang their songs from dawn to dusk.

It was with sadness in his heart that he had to leave the beauty of the desert behind, but the lessons of the saguaro will last this Irishman a lifetime and will enable him and hopefully others to survive the prickles of life and the inevitable tough times that will cross our paths. ☺

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