



By Jennifer Jimenez
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Scorching temperatures and a lack of moisture in the air at night are contributing to the loss of arms and saguaros as a whole around the Valley.

From Sun City to Mesa and Queen Creek, there is almost a certainty a few saguaro arms or an entire cactus laying on the ground, collapsed because of heat and water issues.

Residents and businesses are dealing with the clean up and attempting to find ways to help the succulents survive what could be lingering issues spurred by hotter summers and less rain than normal.

Saguaros are a common sight in Arizona, and according to the National Park Service, the plants are protected in part by the Native Plant

Protection Act, which makes the removal of a saguaro illegal whether they are on public or private land without the permission of the landowner.

Todd Patty, Recreation Centers of Sun City West environmental services manager, said Sun City West has lost a good amount of saguaros. Despite the quarter inch of rain one golf course in the community recorded Aug. 31, mere ounces landed on some of the others, and Patty said there just isn't enough rain to keep up with the natural watering process.

"There is a lot going on this summer with the saguaro with arms falling off and total collapses happening overnight," he said.



Todd Patty

At the time of publication, Patty said 32 saguaro throughout the community have succumb to losing arms or falling to the floor.

When it comes to safety, Patty and his staff go out each morning to evaluate the saguaros to see if any have fallen or are leaning and need to be addressed. The group is proactive and will remove a saguaro to prevent it for falling on someone or in the road, he added.

A mature saguaro can grow to 40- to 60-foot tall and weigh upwards of a ton or more, according to the National Park Service.

There are many factors that play into a saguaro falling. Angela Dado, with Phoenix-based The Cactus Doctor, said if the arms are

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growing too fast may make the saguaro top heavy and cause it to fall. The plant also could be in vascular decline because the vascular system is not able to pump out any more oxygen to distribute to different parts of the plant, Dado added.

The heat, particularly around more urban areas in Phoenix, Tucson and other cities, may be causing some of the saguaros problems, Dado said.

“Due to excessive heat, the saguaro is not able to absorb any more air moisture during the night time,” Dado said.

All cactus are succulents, but not all succulents are cactus and open up to receive water at night. It is not recommended to water the base of the saguaro as it needs air moisture, not ground moisture, to thrive, Dado said.

The saguaro needs to cool down to breathe, and with transplant saguaros in neighborhoods near sidewalks and roads, the heat can remain trapped and cause issues with the plant’s ability to take in water.

Dado suggested removing gravel and paving stones from the base of a saguaro to prevent a heat-island effect. Rather, leave the base naked. A mist can be sprayed in

the air near the saguaro when the region is experiencing extreme heat during the time of night the saguaro is taking in moisture, Dado said.

“If a saguaro is still not developing and the flesh is becoming soft, people can buy a 50% shade cloth or sun block and wrap it on the saguaro just one time, never double wrap, as it still needs oxygen and sunlight and to prevent the growth of bacteria,” Dado said.

A drooping arm on a saguaro or a crack on the joint means it is time to remove the arms. Failure to remove the arm could leave a large crevasse left behind when it fails, Dado said.

“We do have a cactus horticulturist expert that does come out and examines saguaros and recommends or treats them for a fee,” she said.

Dado said a nitrogen treatment can be applied to the soil, if needed, but it is only recommended during from March through October before the succulents become dormant. She warned simply relying on a landscaper to help with a saguaro can be problematic. If residents are not dealing with an expert, Dado suggests calling the [Desert Botanical Garden](#) to speak to a cactus horticulturist if there is any doubt.

“You cannot diagnose

anything by just looking at a photo,” she explained.

It’s not just saguaros suffering in the heat. Agave plants also are collapsing. Though not all succulents suffered, and despite the heat and lack of moisture, the ocotillo look to be coming back, according to Patty.

This summer’s heat, where the Valley saw more than 30 days of high temperatures above 110 degrees Fahrenheit and nighttime lows in the 90s, didn’t just affect succulents. Patty said Sun City West also was dealing with a number of trees getting burnt from the sun.

“I am seeing some plants start to come back, and this rain is certainly going to help with cooler temperatures,” he said.

Patty said during the extreme heat, the only solution is to make sure plants are getting the proper amount of water. But if staff sees a plant they believe is unable to come back, it will be removed.

Arizona organ pipe, totem poles, Mexican fence post and barrels may need a little help too during extreme heat, but Dado said over-watering will always cause the cactus or succulent to die.

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*Jennifer Jimenez can be reached
at jjimenez@iniusa.org, or on
Twitter @scw_independent.*