A Prickly Subject

Have you ever pricked your finger on a cactus? These thorny plants grow in deserts—regions that get less than 10 inches of rainfall per year, where water evaporates quickly. They also grow in other environments.

The Mini Page visited the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum near Tucson, Arizona, recently and spoke with a horticulturist* there to learn more about cacti. (Cacti is the plural word for cactus.)

What is a cactus?
Many, but not all, cacti:
• have spines, or needles.
• don’t have leaves.

Harsh environment
The arid, or dry, conditions in the desert allow about 90 percent of sunlight to reach the ground, compared to 40 percent in a humid, or wet, area such as a forest. This intense ultraviolet radiation from the sun can be dangerous for human skin, but it can harm the tissues of plants and animals, too.

Plants such as cacti that live in deserts have adapted, or changed, to survive. For example:
• Cacti have shallow roots that can quickly take up water from rain.
• They can hold a large amount of water.
• Cacti can harvest water from rain.
• Their spines capture less sunlight than leaves, making the plant grow more slowly.
• A horticulturist is a scientist who studies the growth of plants.

Mini Fact: All cacti are succulents, but there are some succulents that are not cacti.

Succulent means “full of juice.”

Spines also shade the cactus and protect it from predators. Some spines are large, sharp, and bright pink. The small, fuzzy bumps on some cacti’s skin are called areoles (AIR-ee-ohls). They produce spines, flowers, and branches.

Mini Fact: Cacti may look prickly, but they’re important to desert animals. Bats, birds, and insects collect the nectar from flowers and help pollinate the flowers to produce seeds. Their fruits contain seeds that are eaten by birds and mammals, including coyotes.

Woodpeckers, hawks, and other birds make nests in large cacti. When the weather is extremely dry, desert sage and big horn sheep will eat cactus to get the water stored inside.

Native Americans have used the fruit of cacti to make wine, jelly, syrup, and candies for many centuries. Prickly pear cactus pads with the spines removed can be eaten fresh, frozen, or grilled.

Cook’s Corner
Cactus Fruit Sorbet

You’ll need:
• 7-9 fruits), skinned and chopped
• 1/2 cup sugar
• 2 tablespoons lemon juice

What to do:
1. Place cactus fruits in a blender and pulse until smooth.
2. Combine sugar, water, and salt in a small saucepan to make a simple syrup. Warm over medium heat until sugar is dissolved.
3. Add simple syrup and lemon juice to fruit and blend until smooth.
4. Pour mixture into a bowl through a sieve. Chill at least 4 hours or overnight.
5. Freeze using an ice cream machine according to manufacturer’s instructions. Let set completely in freezer. Makes 3 cups.

Try ’n’ Find
Words that remind us of cacti are hidden in this puzzle. Some words are hidden backward or diagonally, and combinations will be necessary to complete the puzzle.

Adapt, animals, areole, areoles, arid, birds, cactus, desert, epidermis, flowers, fruit, humid, insects, pollinate, prickle, pricks, palmate, pinnate, plants, poop, porcupine, rain, saguaro, shallow, skeleton, spine, succulent, sunlight.

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7 Little Words for Kids
Use the letters in the boxes to make a word with the same meaning as the clue. The numbers in parentheses represent the number of letters in each word. Each letter can be used only once, but all letter combinations will be necessary to complete the puzzle.

1. Army green (6)
2. It circles the Earth (4)
3. Shake in the cold (6)
4. Large bear (7)
5. Jumping insect (7)
6. Cookie man (11)
7. The color of mud (5)

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