

Saguaro harvest begins the New Year

The "month of the saguaro seeds turning black," *Kaij Cukalig Maşad* (May), once was the hardest time of year for the Tohono O'odham. Sometimes called the "painful month," it was a time of hunger, the last of many long winter and spring months with dwindling food supplies and little water. It was a time of waiting for the saguaro fruit to ripen.

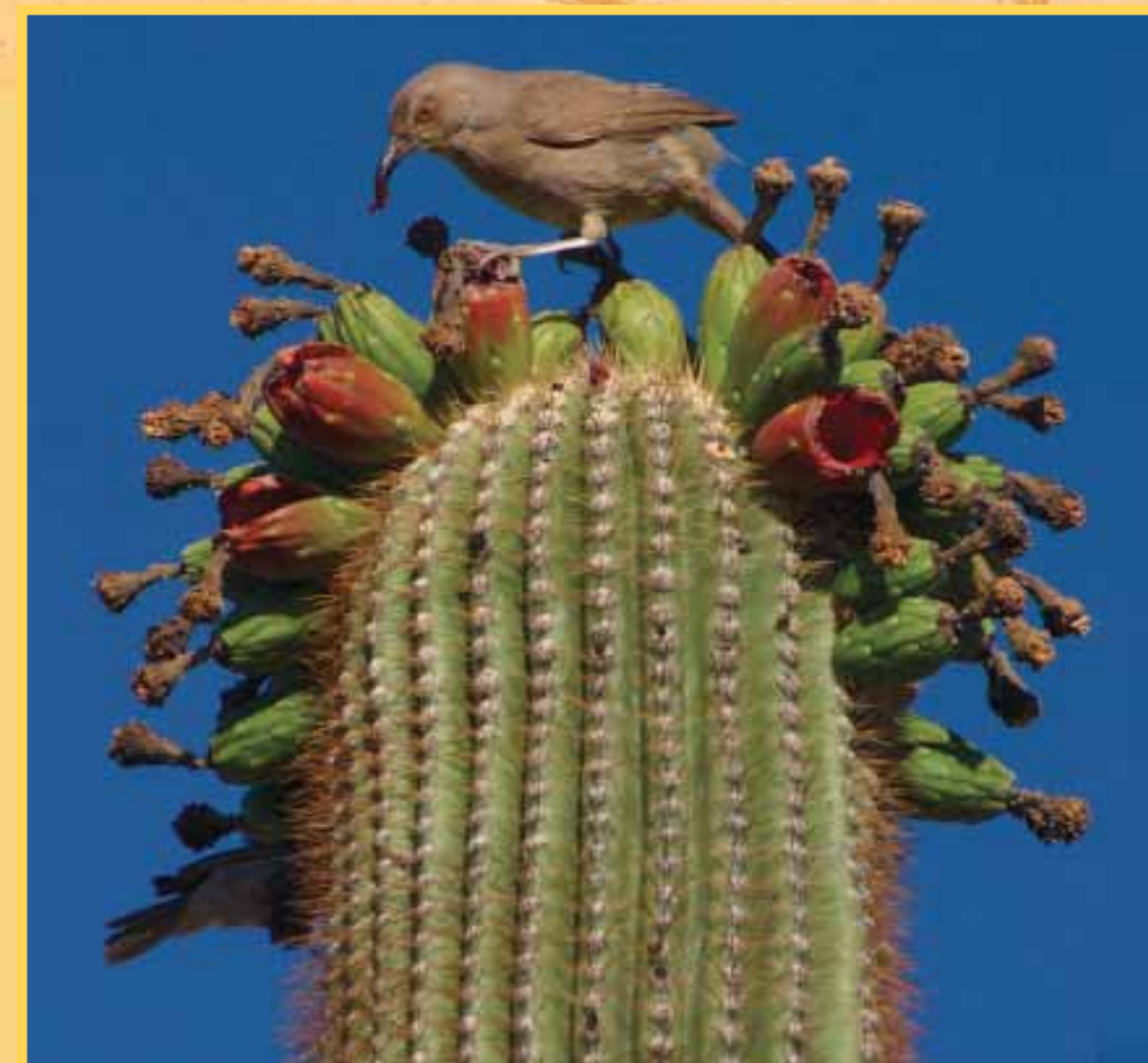
After the first saguaro flowers appeared, it would be five or six weeks before the earliest fruit was ripe and ready to harvest. During this final month of the Tohono O'odham year, the Desert People looked forward to their first taste of something sweet in a very long time, to the season of monsoon rains that the saguaro harvest signaled, to the New Year.



Just 34 calories,
each saguaro fruit
is a tasty treat!

As saguaro fruit ripens, the pulp turns red and juicy and the seeds turn black. When a piece of fruit is fully ripe, its husk splits open and curls back to reveal the pulp and seeds. This means feast-time for birds, though some species, including doves, peck at closed fruit to test for ripeness. These "early birds" may even empty a piece of fruit of its seeds before the husk splits.

Tradition reminded the Tohono O'odham to share the long-awaited saguaro fruit with the birds.

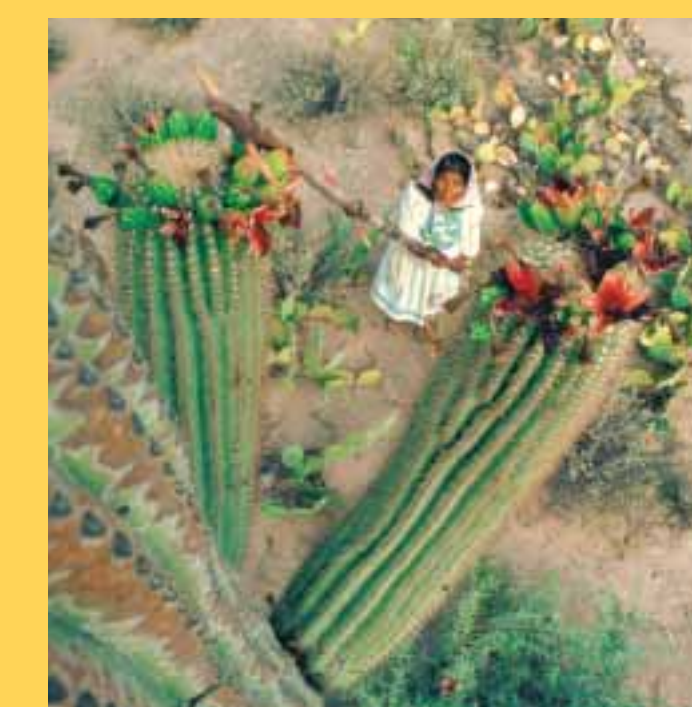


A strong and flexible framework of woody ribs supports the saguaro's immense weight.

Harvesting begins with a saguaro rib

Ku'ipad—cactus puller—is the Tohono O'odham name for their traditional saguaro

harvesting pole and also for the starry constellation known to many people as the Big Dipper. The long tool, 15–24 ft / 4.5–7 m, is made of two saguaro ribs tied together. Crosspieces of creosote or acacia wood, attached midway and near the top of the pole, let harvesters hook fruit and pull it down.



The first step in preserving the annual harvest is to split open the fruit that isn't open already and scoop the pulp and seeds into a bucket, but many temptingly sweet and crunchy fruit are eaten on the spot! During the last harvest of the season, the emptied husks are placed on the ground with their red interiors turned toward the sky to hasten the rains.