

# THE QUEEN OF THE NIGHT



Tohono Chul's first Bloom Night took place in the summer of 1992 with a small number of flowers enjoyed by a few staff and friends. The Bloom Nights enjoyed by thousands since then would not be possible but for the dedicated recordkeeping of Karen Kubara and Ann Nyhan who started our phenology study almost 20 years ago.







One of the legendary plants of the Southwest is La Reina de la Noche, the Queen of the Night. Scientifically known as *Peniocereus greggii*, this native night-blooming cactus mostly resembles a bundle of dead sticks except for a couple of nights each year when large, fragrant white flowers appear only to fade with the light of day.



The Queen is quirky in a number of ways besides its fleeting flowering. Its fragile, finger-thin branches resemble dead palo verde twigs or creosote stems, plants beneath which this cactus is likely to grow for protection and support. This spindly-looking desert survivor is actually nourished by a large, tuberous root growing below the surface which weighs 5 to 15 pounds. The *Cereus* itself can reach a height of ten feet with support.





There are over 400 individual *Peniocereus greggii* on the grounds of Tohono Chul, some original to the site but most transplanted donations or salvage from the path of the Central Arizona Project. Examples of the other ten or so species of *Peniocereus* found in an area ranging from southern Arizona to west Texas and south into Sonora and Chihuahua, are part of the Queen's Court, making an appearance on Bloom Nights.

And about that bloom . . . how can you tell? Buds begin appearing in mid-April. The whitish ones generally become branches and the pinkish ones, flowers. Those flower buds grow in spurts, sometimes stalling for a week or more. Grounds staff take careful measurements, knowing once they reach a certain size, they will bloom within a few days. The night before, there is a partial opening of the flower tip and on the afternoon of, the bud begins to swell, a sure sign.

Interestingly, each plant can produce three to five flushes of flowers between late May and early August. During each flush, the plants in a given area bloom simultaneously, increasing their chances of cross-pollination by large hawk moths. Once pollinated, the seeds of the edible fruits are spread by birds. For the record, the largest number of flowers on a single plant at Tohono Chul is 34.





**PENIOO**



**CEREUS**

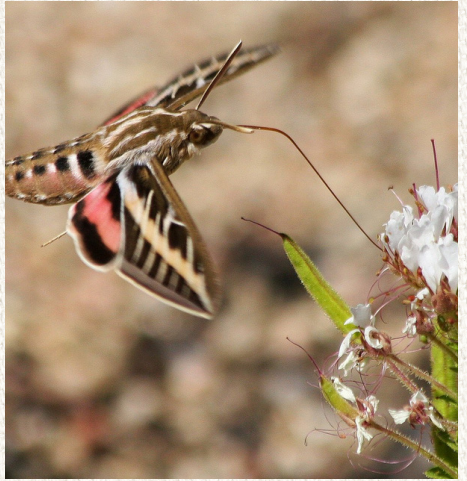




FIG. 166.—*Peniocereus greggii*.





PENIOCEREUS FOSTERIANUS



PENIOCEREUS JOHST

PENIOCEREUS VIPERINIUS



TONII

PENIOCEREUS MARIANUS





Many of our plants have been given names over the years, recognizing the person who discovered it, honoring the special friends or identifying a particular characteristic of the individual plant, like Emerald (green tinged flowers) or Slim (narrow petals).

Tohono  Chul  
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