

Bountiful rains brought bountiful crops

Another summer of rain meant another season of harvest—of tepary beans and squash and corn. Traditional Tohono O’odham fields were located at the mouths of arroyos where floodwaters deposited fertile silt from the foothills and mountains. Crops were planted in soil made rich by previous seasons of flooding and were irrigated with water from the current season’s rainfall. The Tohono O’odham honored the desert’s rhythms and the desert rewarded their wisdom and hard work with successful harvests.

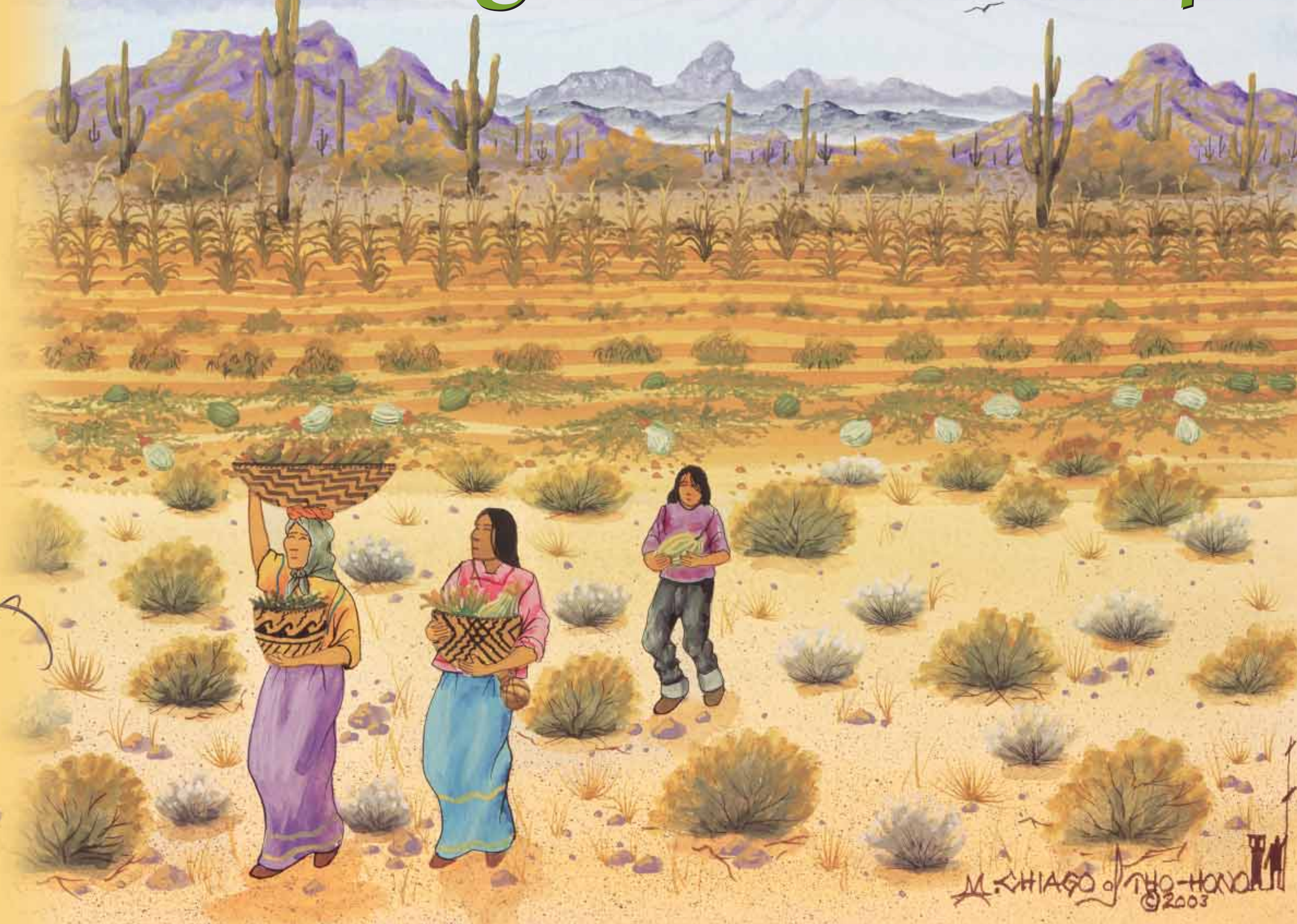


Tohono O’odham farmers grew devil’s claw (*‘ihug*) for making baskets, including those they used in the saguaro wine ceremony to summon rain back to the desert year after year.

Saguaro’s story doesn’t end with death

While saguaros die from many causes—including drought, disease, hungry animals, encroaching development, vandalism, lightning, wind, old age, and especially freezing temperatures—death doesn’t end their role in their desert community. A variety of insects and other animals feed on

and make their homes in decaying and fallen saguaros. People use dried saguaro ribs for building materials and tools, such as the Tohono O’odham’s “cactus puller,” and empty “boots” are perfect storage containers.



And finally, will the real saguaro please stand up?!



The saguaro’s distinctive shape is recognizable far and wide as “cactus,” even to people who do not know the name “saguaro.” While it grows in a relatively small area, the saguaro has become an iconic image of the American southwest. Hollywood moviemakers have long used saguaros as props to indicate the “Wild West;” and businesses of all kinds employ cartoon-like saguaros (sometimes adorned with sombreros and sunglasses) on signs and in advertisements for a south-of-the-border feel.

However, to the Tohono O’odham, saguaro will always be a person and a partner in their efforts to survive in a harsh land. To all of us, the saguaro is a principal member of the Sonoran Desert’s unique community of interdependent plants and animals. The real saguaro is indeed standing up—we need only look and see.

*When I walk in the desert the birds sing very beautifully
When I walk in the desert
The trees wave their branches in the breeze
When I walk in the desert
The tall saguaro wave their arms way up high
When I walk in the desert the animals stop and look
at me as if they were saying
“Welcome to our home.”*

—Jeanette Chico from *When it Rains*

Basket from Tohono Chul Park Collection, Gift of Agnes T. and Don L. Smith
Jeanette Chico from *When it Rains*, Pappago and Pima Poetry,
Ofelia Zepeda, ed., Sun Tracks Vol. 7, University of Arizona Press, 1982
Saguaro hot-air balloon © Fred Golden, courtesy of Flying Colours Hot Air Balloons
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