
Gateway Desert Awareness Park

by: Stephanie Bradley

A FAMILY PARK IN THE HEART OF CAVE CREEK

photos: Gretchen Mills



Just off Cave Creek Road, on Vermeersch Road in Cave Creek, is a honey of a spot. Gateway Desert Awareness Park offers visitors a close-up look at life in a wash area. With the hum of traffic muffled by desert trees and the rolling topography, civilization seems to disappear, though hints of it remain with scattered housing and, more on the scene, a playground, ramadas and barbecues for picnickers.

Cutting through the center of the park is Galloway Wash, a strident streak of sands and gravels that are the battered remains of the nearby mountains. Rains pound the uplands, breaking up rock, then churning it into smaller particles that are readily transported downhill by fast moving waters which collect and drain through washes. When the washes are dry,



which is most of the time, they are an unsettling landform that portends potential disaster from latent water power. But in good weather, which we enjoy regularly, the washes are safe to pass through and explore. (Do exercise caution. The sky may be clear and blue in Cave Creek, but rain in the hills could carry water into the area. If you see water in the wash, no matter how shallow it appears, do not enter.)

Although water flow is ephemeral, washes are warehouses of underground water, a fact not missed by life. Along the banks and small islands, desert broom attaches itself and in so doing anchors the land so that other, less tenacious desert plants can gain a root-hold. Desert broom has become *planta-non-grata* to many since its numbers have greatly increased due to wide scale disturbance and blading of desert lands. The opportunistic broom quickly takes root as the first plant pioneer. Desert broom is reliably green year-round, but when it blooms, its veritable snowstorm of seed puffs that collect in corners and irritate sinuses, can be unwelcome.

Mesquite, ironwood and palo verde trees find their way into the wash area, usually huddling with the desert broom as well as sages, brittlebush and cacti. Desert plants often grow in clusters rather than in isolation as many landscapers would have newcomers believe. The true desert is lumpy with life, as different plants shade each other, vie for water and minerals, and the attention of passing animals.

Two trails through Gateway Desert Awareness Park pass a variety of naturally



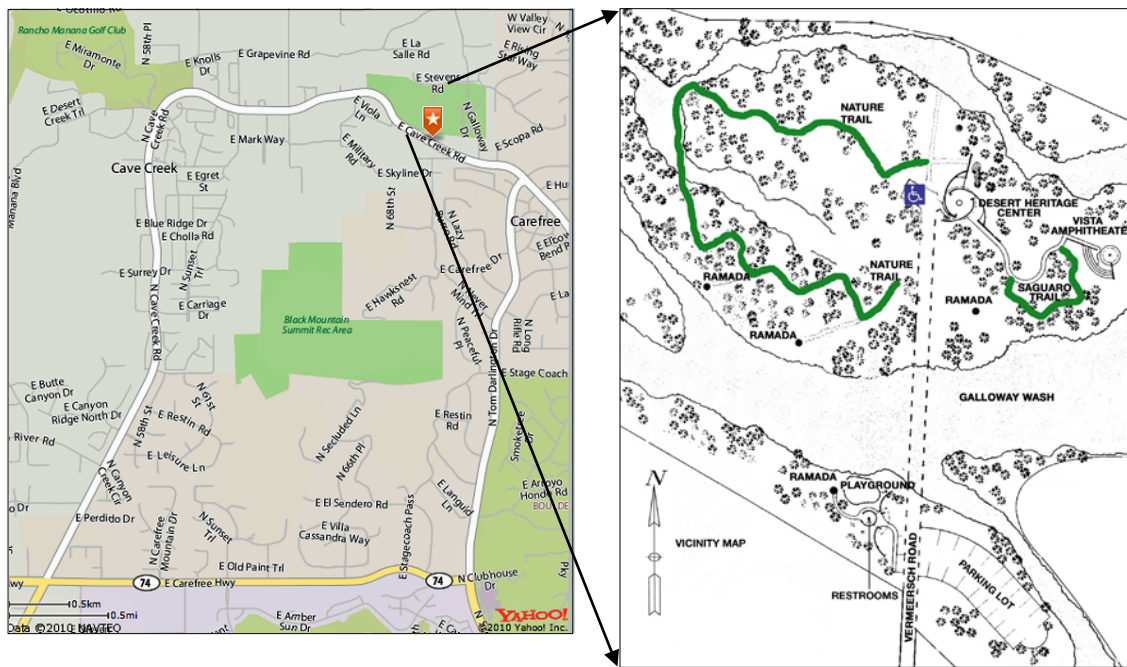
occurring desert plants, which are identified by signs. Desert plants are not necessarily sun lovers. They are non-mobile organisms that cannot hop in a car to cooler climes. They must finagle methods to cope with searing sun and limited water, or die. Notice how most of the leaves are demure, if present at all. Wide, large leaves such as those on oaks or maples allow water loss, a disaster for

desert dwellers. So leaves are small, often leathery or "dusty" to limit water loss and the effects of heat exposure.



One visit to Gateway Desert Awareness Park isn't enough. As the season passes from the summer heat to cooler fall temperatures, plants become more vigorous, sprouting leaves on what had appeared to be a dead plant last summer. As winter approaches, some plants show signs of developing flowers, others sport seeds or berries. With sufficient rain, the desert masks its dryness with lush plants which take full advantage of Nature's bounty. With the spring, cacti shock the green and beige desert palate with waxy gold, pink, purple and other bright flowers.

Discover more about desert plants by exploring the park, open daily to the public during daylight hours. Facilities may be reserved by contacting the Town of Cave Creek at 480-488-1400.



Left map shows the location of Gateway Desert Awareness Park within the Town of Cave Creek, Arizona. Map on right is an enlarged view of the park.

In Cave Creek, drive north ¼ mile on Vermeersch Road from Cave Creek Road.

