
Seeds

by: Margaret Stewart, August 2001

THE INTERESTING DIVERSITY OF SEEDS

Have you seen this summer's crop of seeds? They lie on the ground, they hang from the trees and shrubs, they hook onto your socks. They crunch under your feet and have to be swept off your patio. It's feasting time for desert birds and beasts.

The rains of winter and spring produced flowers in extravagant abundance, and this profusion of fruits has followed.

Desert plants exist and thrive because of their amazing abilities to take advantage of whatever Nature provides. This year the frequent rains made seeding easy, and the chances of propagating their kind were increased. Now they must rely on Nature's whims to get their seeds planted in the right ground and to provide the right conditions so they can sprout and put down roots in this harsh environment. It's a huge gamble. Few seeds will get that far; fewer still will grow to maturity.

In addition to providing heaps of seeds, many enterprising desert plants have developed amazing techniques to give their offspring a great sendoff. The ripe fruit of a barrel cactus may be whisked away by a passing ground squirrel, allowing the fine black seeds to drizzle out of its top like salt from a salt shaker. Seeds from bursage, sand burrs and brittle grasses not only torment you, but cling to animal fur as well, traveling miles until released.

The devil's claw¹, an annual, must work fast to give the next generation a boost. Its seed pod has wicked hooks that can fasten around an animal's leg



until it is roughly kicked away, scattering out the seeds at the same time.

Some plant mothers depend on animals to eat their brood, which pass through digestive systems that break down their hard shells and then deposit them in another location. Check out the next pile of coyote dung you find for the smooth oval seeds of the coyote melon² (gourd).



Birds that flock to the saguaro³ fruit will help that slow-growing giant extend its habitat when they eat the seeds along with the sweet red flesh and then drop them in new locations. The sleek, black phainopepla does the same job for the mistletoe.

Seeds from some shrubs travel by air. Female plants of the desert broom develop millions of silky white seeds that float on the winds of late summer and collect in drifts along roadsides and arroyos, where they have a better chance of being drenched by rain. The insignificant flower of the paper bag bush is attached to a tiny white balloon, so it can bounce across the desert when propelled by a breeze.

But what if, at its arrival in a new location, the seed finds that the sun is too hot and the rains don't come? Well, many of them will wait, a decade or more, in their hard shells for Nature to supply the kind of rains we had in the winter of 2000-2001. Then they will stir and sprout and cover the hillsides with brief, heart-stopping beauty for us to enjoy until the essential seed making process begins once more.

¹ Devil's Claw or Unicorn Plant; *Proboscidea parviflora*; photo: http://www.localharvest.org/images/cat/prod_6681_8206.jpg

² *Cucurbita palmata*; photo: *Cucurbita digitata*; photo by Dave Mills

³ *Carnegiea gigantea* fruit and seeds; photo by Dave Mills

