



DESERT HARVEST

By Donna Derosia

The dry, baking days of summer are upon us. With the blazing heat comes the hope of our summer rains to relieve the suffering plants & animals. The saguaro fruit is ready for harvesting & the Tohono O'odham are busy collecting the fruit.

According to Big Jim Griffith our local folklorist & co-founder of Tucson Meet Yourself the saguaro fruit is harvested with a tool made from two saguaro ribs called a guiput. If you wait too long to harvest the birds will beat you to the fruit. You can cut the fruit open & scoop the sweet pulp out and eat it fresh. Or it can be cooked down & strained through cheesecloth, re-cooked & reduced to a syrup. The syrup can be stored & fermented into a wine which is used in a ceremony to call the summer rains. If you have ever wondered why it seems to rain more on the reservation this may be the reason.

Colossal Cave Mountain Park has a public Saguaro Harvest Celebration, the Ha:san Bac that will be held on July 6th starting at 5:30 a.m. The Tohono Oodham believe the saguaros are people, descended from a boy who was lost in the desert and was turned into a saguaro. For this reason they believe they should be treated with the same respect you would show any other human.

The mesquite beans are beginning to fall from their heavy branches. I've developed a scientifically based method of collecting the beans. I put a big tarp under the tree and shake the branches until no more beans fall. You only want to collect the ripe beans. If you want to make flour from the beans you need to kill the borers that will infest the beans if you leave them on the ground. Freezing the beans kills the bugs.

Archaeological evidence proves the beans have been a staple food of critters & humans alike from 6500 BC. They can be chewed on directly from the tree-that's the way my dogs like them. They are also a favorite snack of many desert creatures including squirrels, rabbits & birds. Mesquite is a high protein superfood that has a low glycemic index, is gluten free & is a great source of calcium, iron, lysine, manganese, potassium & zinc. It's a good source of soluble fiber, tannins, inulin & mucilaginous polysaccharide gums that help to prevent & improve diabetes. It is naturally sweet but low in sugar which makes it a perfect food for lowering the amount of sugar you use in baking. It gives a very distinctive flavor to anything you cook with it while adding so many health benefits. The beans aren't ready to process into flour when they are harvested. I will delve into other processing techniques in the following months.

There is so little food for the birds this time of year they try everything they can to prey on our gardens. Our gardens are stressing in the sun & many plants will cease to throw fruit while it is so hot. Be patient-don't pull them up yet! Once the monsoons begin the plants seem to take on a whole new life. It seems like I can water & water but as soon as the rain hits the plants it's like magic has fallen on them. They begin to show new life that simple water can't provide. Even those poor little chewed up plants may start to rejuvenate themselves once it rains.

The native pumpkins, squash & gourds will begin to thrive with the rains & it will be time to plant more seeds for the second growing season. We are so fortunate to be blessed with such a long growing season. I've had good luck this year with red onions, beets, tomatoes, peppers, squash, greens & herbs. I have been diligently allowing my plants to go to seed for seed collecting purposes. If you have any interesting seeds I would like to do some seed trading.

Let's join the rain dance & anticipate that first rain on our parched desert. I can almost smell the first rain as it falls on the creosote & releases that special aroma only us desert dwellers get to savor. Creosote is a special shrub that can live up to 10,000 years by recloning itself. I dry the creosote & infuse it in hot water to soak my aching feet after work on many occasions. I also just used an infusion to bath my dog that has itchy skin.

REMEMBER-DO THE RAIN DANCE DAILY & THINK ONLY POSITIVE RAIN THOUGHTS!