

# CACTUS FAMILY ALBUM

## CACTACEAE

### Barrels, Teddy Bears, and Organ Pipes

Distinctive, dramatic, formidable. Certainly a number of adjectives could describe the cactus family. The plants' distinctive shapes, combined with their diversity of textures and spine patterns, give rise to a host of colorful common names and engender the enthusiasm of plant collectors worldwide.

Primarily  
New  
World

plants adapted for regions where rainfall is scarce, cacti have a reduced ratio of surface area to volume by having stems that are succulent and green. The stems function as “water reservoirs” and conduct most of the photosynthesis. The leaves, on the other hand, have been drastically modified into spines that deter desert critters from feeding on the moist tissue. But not all cacti are “leafless”—in the genus *Pereskia*, one of the oldest cactus lineages, leaves have been retained.

Cacti are sometimes confused with members of the spurge family, *Euphorbiaceae*, that are also found in deserts. Although cacti are associated with arid regions, the genus *Opuntia* can occur across the United States and as far north as Canada. Members of the cactus family show their affinity

with other plant groups by containing the red pigment betalain—the red color present in edible cactus fruits is the same as that found in beets.



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