Crested cacti are a neverending source of fascination for lovers of desert plants. Discussions inevitably raise questions such as: Why do cacti crest? Why are some more likely to crest than others? What causes concentrations of crested cacti?

For dedicated “cactus huggers,” or even the mildly curious, spotting a crested Saguaro (*Carnegiea gigantea*) is a rare and special treat. As befits the monarch of the Sonoran Desert, Saguaro cansport the largest, most spectacular crests in the succulent plant world—and wear these rare crowns with unmatched style and panache. How large? Crest hunter Don Graham reported a nine foot crest on the Papago Plain west of Tucson but did not publish a photo. Most are in the three to five foot range—that’s three to four times the normal stem diameter for this cactus tree.

The majority of Saguaro crests are the classic fan shape (and its many variations) formed when cells in the growing tip (meristem) divide along a lateral axis rather than in the radially symmetrical pattern of a normal, round stem. Occasionally a rare ring crest, resembling a lumpy and partially inflated inner tube, forms around a normal apex. Ring crests can evolve into a U shape or series of convoluted folds. While neither of these patterns has been observed in the Saguaro, they have been seen in other large cacti, such as *Ferocactus wislizenii*.

A Saguaro salvaged from the Central Arizona Project right of way provided a unique opportunity to observe crest formation. Ribs at the apex began to take on a wavy appearance after transplanting and gradually, over a period of about ten years, developed into a full crest. Unfortunately no photos were taken. The plant is now established and thriving at Bach’s Cactus Nursery in Tucson. Dan Bach notes that when columnar cacti add ribs at the apex, a crest is likely to form.

For more images of crested saguaros visit the current issue of Cactus and Succulent Journal on our website, www.cssainc.org.