Transplanting large saguaros
the right way

Whether ignorance or profit motive is to blame, large Saguaros salvaged for residential landscapes often face poor prospects for survival. Practical understanding of this tree’s roots and desert ecology points the way to success.

Destination: Forever Ranch and Gardens was founded in 1999 with an emphasis on displaying xeric plants from around the world, grown to reach their full potential in the ground. Learning to move large succulents was one of the project’s first priorities, so I built a specially-designed hydraulic trailer and have now moved nearly 200 large succulents (mostly Saguaros) and thousands of smaller ones, both for my own horticultural venture and for commercial and private landscaping projects, learning along the way the ins and outs of transplanting these magnificent plants successfully.

When I first began this work, I immediately adopted what I thought was an utterly common sense policy: while digging, preserve as many roots of a transplant as possible, and offer follow-up care in the form of proper watering. But what I thought to be common sense was far from common practice among seasoned Saguaro transplanters, landscapers, and nursery owners. High rates of transplant mortality (some say 70%) have long been accepted as the cost moving these fragile giants.

Tried and true for trauma

The Saguaro (Carnegiea gigantea) is probably the most frequently-moved and best-known of the large US natives. When transplanting them, most professionals closely chop off most or all of the plant’s roots, plug the base deeply into a narrow, shaft-like hole (like a large fence post), and then withhold water for up to a year “in order to prevent subterranean rot.” Generally considered best practice, in reality this technique often results in the slow demise of the plant. Saguaros can take a decade to die, making the correlation between the move and death hard to track. Current methods seem designed to reduce labor and increase profits rather than foster real success. Under these conditions it can be assumed that success occurs only in spite of this treatment, not because of it.

Conventional wisdom, in this case, runs counter to the philosophy most of us adopt when transplanting most other succulents in cultivation, big or small. When transplanting, we preserve as many roots as possible, plant close to the original depth line, and provide adequate and careful supplemental watering until the roots have recovered, which in the case of very large plants may take several years. I have found that much higher rates of transplant success can be achieved by applying these principles to the Saguaro.

Measuring 7 m tall, with three arms each up to 2 m long, this Saguaro was most likely already mature when it was plucked from the wild some 15–30 years ago and re-sited in a yard in Lake Havasu City, Arizona, an area whose low natural rainfall precludes naturally-occurring Saguaros. Relocating landscape plants in this region has afforded me the chance to compare plants and their transplanting histories. I moved this plant in May 2006. Originally placed with at least 1 m of its trunk buried, this saguaro was not physically supported by roots.

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