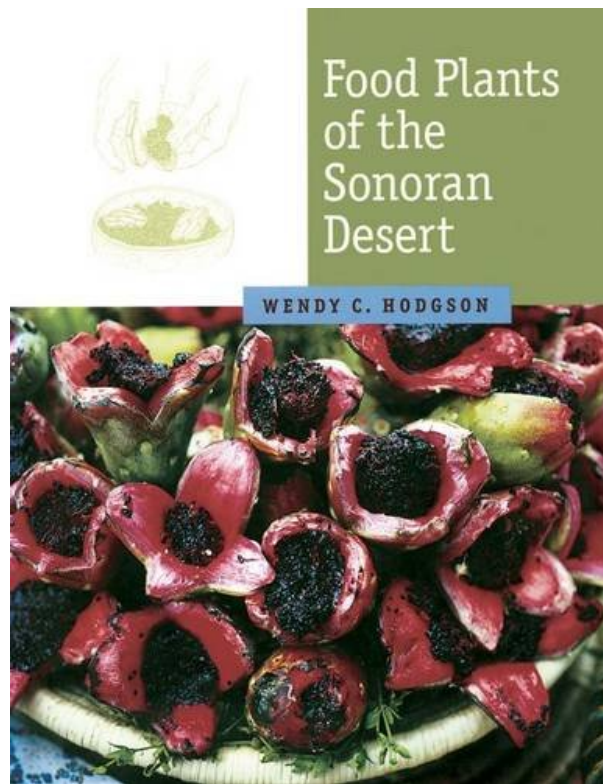


# FOOD PLANTS OF THE SONORAN DESERT

## BY WENDY C. HODGSON



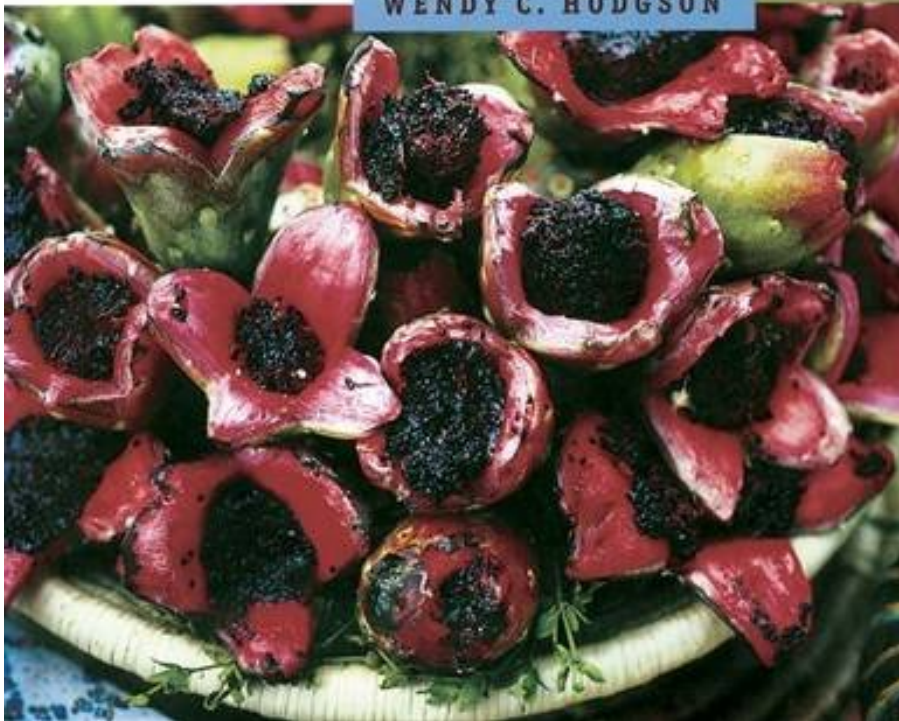
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## Review

Winner of the Society for Economic Botany's Klinger Book Award.

"Finally! A book that all desert food lovers can enjoy . . . Decidedly the best ethnobotanical resource for the desert Southwest in print . . . The richness and diversity of the desert is wonderful and limitless and nowhere, with the exception of the desert itself, is it more apparent than in this book." —Seedhead News

"Blood, sweat, tears, and ethnobotanical passion for plants are what Wendy Hodgson's extensively researched book represents. . . . Packed with fascinating stories that highlight plant-to-people connections." —Plant Systematics and Evolution

## About the Author

Wendy C. Hodgson is a research botanist and herbarium curator at the Desert Botanical Garden in Phoenix.

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The seemingly inhospitable Sonoran Desert has provided sustenance to indigenous peoples for centuries. Although it is to all appearances a land bereft of useful plants, fully one-fifth of the desert's flora are edible.

This volume presents information on nearly 540 edible plants used by people of more than fifty traditional cultures of the Sonoran Desert and peripheral areas. Drawing on thirty years of research, Wendy Hodgson has synthesized the widely scattered literature and added her own experiences to create an exhaustive catalog of desert plants and their many and varied uses.

Food Plants of the Sonoran Desert includes not only plants such as gourds and legumes but also unexpected food sources such as palms, lilies, and cattails, all of which provided nutrition to desert peoples. Each species entry lists recorded names and describes indigenous uses, which often include nonfood therapeutic and commodity applications. The agave, for example, is cited for its use as food and for alcoholic and nonalcoholic beverages, syrup, fiber, cordage, clothing, sandals, nets, blankets, lances, fire hearths, musical instruments, hedgerows, soap, and medicine, and for ceremonial purposes. The agave entry includes information on harvesting, roasting, and consumption—and on distinguishing between edible and inedible varieties.

No other source provides such a vast amount of information on traditional plant uses for this region. Written to be easily accessible to general readers, the book is an invaluable compendium for anyone interested in the desert's hidden bounty.

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#### Most helpful customer reviews

13 of 13 people found the following review helpful.

Required reference book for the Sonoran Desert

By Ron Skinner

This is not an "edible plants" field guide. It is an in depth review of Arizona, Sonora, and Baja desert plants useful as food and for other purposes. It is useful for building short term survival skills, for adding desert plants to ones diet, and as an ethnologic look at the indigenous population of the Sonoran Desert. It is an excellent book and one I am very happy to own.

11 of 11 people found the following review helpful.

Exhaustively researched, accurate, and useful

By Sam Thayer

I divide wild food books into two types: those based on personal experience (or at least that pretend to be), and those based on research of ethnology. Hodgson's book falls into the latter category, and I think it is the best such book ever written, at least for any part of North America. Food Plants of the Sonoran Desert covers hundreds of species--all or virtually all that are known or strongly suspected to be used (or have been used previously) for food in this region. The diversity of plants covered is amazing. Some are discussed with very short entries because little is known about their use, while others receive lengthy treatment (mesquite, acorn, *Stenocereus cactus*) because they were staple foods and much has been recorded about their use. The book is done in an admirable scholarly fashion - sources are not only cited, but contradicting sources are sometimes quoted in juxtaposition and discussed.

To those who already have wild food field guides, you will be amazed at how many interesting and useful plants you'll find in this book that you might have never heard of. There are probably more species in here than in most field guides intended to cover the whole continent. (This should be a lesson for those unrealistic foragers who think they'll be able to find a field guide covering a whole continent or country (or even half of one) and thoroughly discuss every wild edible. It just can't fit in one book.) Of course, the Sonoran Desert is only a tiny fraction of the US, and this book also covers the Sonoran parts of Mexico, but many of the plants discussed range well outside this bioregion. I live 1,500 miles from the Sonoran desert and only get there about once every two years, but I still find it fascinating to read.

This is a great book for those interested in natural history, plants, ethnobotany, and the Sonoran Desert in particular. For survivalists, it provides sufficient information for the plants to be actually utilized, at least in many cases.

Although the photos are black and white, they are generally good. That said -- this is NOT AN ID GUIDE.

I wish every bioregion had a book like this. But then again, the ethnographic record in the Sonoran is far better than that in many other parts of the continent.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

Excellent and Informative

By Rob Ralston

I had been searching for an authoritative, exhaustingly-researched book specific to the ancient food plants of

the Sonoran Desert and this is easily the definitive volume.

The book's catalog has three sections: Gymnosperms, Amniosperms: Monocots, and Angiosperms: Dicots, and there are 151 illustrations. Appendices include Plant Species and Parts Used (13 pages), Fruiting Periods of Selected Species Providing Edible Fruit (4 pages), Fruiting Periods of Selected Species Providing Edible Seeds (3 pages), Common Names (Non-English) (7 pages), and Literature Cited (18 pages). A good thorough Index is always helpful and this one includes Common Names in English and many other references for a total of 14 pages.

The amount of writing for each plant varies, likely corresponding with the frequency of its usage as a food source. For example, *Sonchus* (sow-thistle) gets less than half a page, while *Yucca* is more thoroughly explored on a full seven pages.

Ms. Hodgson's approach to the subject matter can be seen in her preface, which begins with a quote from Mary Austin: "When I'm out with the Indian women, gathering roots and materials for basket making, it's not that i expect to make baskets or drink their medicine, it's the things you sort of soak up from the earth while you're with them, it's the things that make women wise. I don't know if I can explain -- it's not as if they learned about the willows and the grasses in order to make baskets, but as if they learned to make baskets by knowing willows. I guess men used to learn that way once -- learned to make bows by knowing the junipers, the way the branches bend and spring back. But now they try to do all their learning in their heads." An excellent quote to start an ethnobotanical study of the plants eaten in the Sonoran Desert before modern agriculture sowed the land with species from other places and poured chemicals all over them and the soil to aid in the temporary appearance of artificial adaptation.

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