

The creosote bush is an amazing desert plant with an extremely long life. It has been a valuable source in medicines and has been used throughout history. So, next time you find yourself out in the Chihuahuan Desert don't forget to stop and smell the beautiful creosote!



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HISTORIC SITE

CREOSOTE



If you live in the Southwestern Borderlands, chances are that you have come across a creosote bush. This evergreen shrub has adapted to desert life so well that some people plant it in their yards. Most will recognize the creosote bush because of its smell.

Taking the leaves and rubbing them between the palms of both hands causes the organic material to break down resulting in a strong fragrance that resembles the smell of rain. Having leaves that give off a smell is only one of the many cool things a creosote bush can do.

If you look closely, you can see that the branches and leaves of the creosote bush are all facing southeast. No matter where the creosote bush is located the branches and leaves all intentionally grow facing that direction. The bush does this to help maximize the amount of sunlight it gets during the morning.

Rain is rare in the desert, so plants in this region need to get as much water as they can and be able to retain it for long periods of time. While many plants naturally grow towards the sun, the creosote bush does this in conjunction with the process of photosynthesis. Photosynthesis is when the plant takes sunlight, carbon dioxide, and water and uses that to produce nutrients for it to live and grow.

Not visible to the naked eye – there are tiny pores that open and close on the leaf of the creosote and this allows the plant to get carbon dioxide so it can produce the nutrients it needs in order to survive, but in doing so the plant loses water, which is not a good thing if you are a plant in the dry desert! In order to prevent the loss of water the creosote bush only opens those pores in the mornings when humidity is at its highest, so the amount of water it loses during this process is at its lowest.

If you think that's unique, the creosote bush also has the ability to clone itself!

This is done when the inner stems of the bush die and the outer ones thrive. This results with the bush duplicating itself as the outer ring expands approximately 3 feet every 500 years creating what appears to be multiple plants in one large ring. This process is called a “clone colony” and all of the bushes within that colony stem from a single root system.

As it continues to grow over the years and the creosote bush expands so much, what is a single creosote bush from the clone colony may appear to look like individual plants randomly growing in the same area. Not all creosote bushes are able to clone themselves, but when they do they live a long life. The oldest creosote bush was found in California in 1985. Thanks to carbon dating, scientists determined it is 11,700 years old. This plant is formally called the King Clone. The King Clone is one of the oldest living organisms on Planet Earth.

The creosote bush is not only able to thrive in the harsh desert environment, but it is also widely recognized for its medicinal and healing properties! In the past the leaves and twigs of the bush were ground up and used as the main ingredients in medicine to cure fever, colds, stomach pains, and many other illnesses. Because of its antimicrobial properties it was also used as a skin wash! The twigs were also chewed to alleviate thirst and the shoot tips of the

twigs were heated and the sap that came from this was dripped on tooth cavities to treat toothaches.

The leaves and twigs weren't the only plant parts that were useful from the creosote bush! The bush is a host to the lac insect. This bug produces and deposits a gum-like material on the stems of the bush. People have harvested this material from the stems of the creosote and by heating and then cooling the lac deposits. They use it as a glue. This has been used to seal lids on food jars, mend pottery, and make baskets. Sometimes it was used to keep stone tools and arrow spear points together.

Today, creosote is used as an ingredient in massage oils, ointments, and salves.

Though the creosote bush is highly sought after for its healing properties, it can also cause some serious negative side effects. Be careful when using parts of the bush, because even touching it may cause allergy in sensitive individuals like itching and rashes when the creosote comes into contact with skin.