

FROM “SAGUARO CACTUS RESOURCES”
PUBLISHED BY UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA MARICOPA COUNTY COOPERATIVE
EXTENSION, AUTHORED BY MICHAEL CHAMBERLAND¹

Saguaro Issues - Summer 2023

Cooperative Extension has been contacted many times this summer about arms falling off saguaro cacti. The arms tend to rip out a portion of the main stem of the saguaro, leaving a bad wound on the trunk. Multiple arms may fall, and in some cases the entire saguaro has come down a few days later. This is happening to saguaro which appear to be healthy.

These saguaro problems might be related to the extended summer heat wave occurring in southern Arizona. The last time Phoenix experienced a similar heat wave, in 2020, we saw many saguaro deaths. However, in 2020 we did not see saguaro arms falling like this. Instead, we observed saguaro were dying with bacterial necrosis, a bacterial rot which is characterized by brown oozing fluid and rotting of the saguaro tissue. Those symptoms were easier to spot when they occurred.

We do not yet know why saguaro arms are falling this year, or why 2023 is playing out differently from 2020. We do not know how to stop saguaro arms from falling. We are unsure if watering saguaro cacti more will help the cacti or might add more weight to the arms and make them more likely to fall. Because arms may fall from a healthy-looking saguaro, we recommend not parking or sitting under or near large saguaro cacti. Keep valuable yard items away from large saguaro. Be cautious around saguaro which have already dropped one or more arms, as it may signal an ongoing decline of the plant. We hope this issue will end when temperatures cool down.

The wounds left to the trunk after arms have fallen are significant and disfiguring. A saguaro which has dropped arms might be weakened or in decline. In many cases this will be reason to consider removing the damaged plant rather than hoping it will grow back. Arms which have fallen off a saguaro and hit the ground offer a poor prospect for rooting and growing into new plants.

A saguaro cactus is a large heavy plant which can cause damage if it falls. When designing a landscape and planting new saguaro, we recommend placing saguaro a good distance from parking areas, driveways, buildings, pools, or seating areas.

[Photos appear on following page.]

¹ Mr. Chamberland consulted with one of our Powderhorn Ranch homeowners who asked if bracing (propping up with padded wooden structure) would help keep our community Saguaro from dropping arms or collapsing. He said that bracing would not prolong the life of cactus or keep it from dropping arms, but could be done “for peace of mind” to help direct an anticipated collapse away from people/homes/fences/cars, where applicable (assuming the aesthetics of ongoing bracing wasn’t objectionable to the community). Also, as noted above, supplemental watering could make matters worse by adding weight suddenly. Mr. Chamberland said trimming/removing healthy arms to help a leaning or “out of balance” Saguaro is not advisable and would likely harm the Saguaro more. Many Saguaros naturally have asymmetrical arms and there is no such thing as them being “out of balance.” He also responded to an inquiry about treating for termites by stating that termites were not among the probable reasons why Saguaros are dropping arms and collapsing throughout metro Phoenix this summer.



Saguaro arm drop seen in 2023



Soon followed by further collapse



Saguaro bacterial necrosis seen in 2020