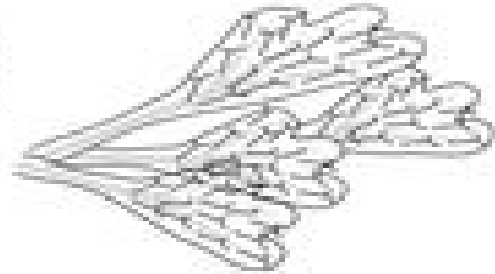


Plant Adaptations

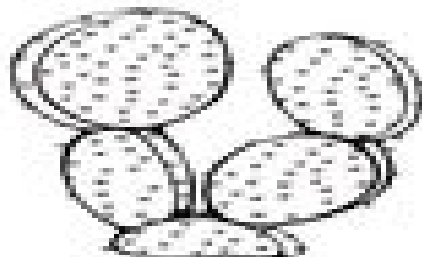
Many desert plants are a dull gray. If you look closely, you will see why. The leaves of some plants, such as sagebrush, are covered with tiny hairs. Leaf hairs reflect the rays of the sun and protect it from being dried out by the wind.



Some desert plants, such as rabbitbrush have very small leaves. Big leaves would allow too much water to escape through evaporation, but small leaves helps the plant conserve water.

Big Sagebrush grows two sets of leaves. Large leaves in the spring allow the plant to take in water and grow rapidly. These leaves fall off in the summer. The smaller leaves that grow on the plant year-round allow for less evaporation and conserve water.

Sagebrush has another way of surviving harsh desert conditions. Three levels of roots allow the plant to obtain all available water. A shallow mat of roots absorbs rainfall rapidly. A second, deeper set of roots extracts water that soaks into the soil as the winter snowpack melts. Finally a taproot extends downward six feet or more to drink in long-lasting ground water.



Whenever the water supply is plentiful, Prickly Pear Cactus collects moisture in the spongy tissue of its enlarged stems, called pads. The cactus can then draw on this stored supply of water when the weather turns dry.