

Riverside County

The Riverside County Courthouse.
Part 9 of 9: Joshua Tree National Park.



Riverside County

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Joshua Tree National Park

Created in 1994, the park is slightly larger than the state of Rhode Island. The 790,000 acres cover two deserts. The Mojave Desert is the northern part of the park and the Colorado, the south. (April 2009)



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The cholla cactus is also known as the “jumping cactus.” The needles don’t actually “jump” but it is easy to get stuck if you are not careful. (April 2009)



Joshua Tree National Park

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Cholla Cactus Garden

If the plant bears any helpful or even innocent part in the scheme of things on this planet, I should be glad to hear of it.

J. Smeaton Chase, *California Desert Trails*, 1919

We humans often find value in other living things only when we see a profit for ourselves. We fail to recognize the value of a thing to itself or other living things. The cholla (choy-ya) cactus is one of these outcasts. If we could ask the desert woodrat or the cactus wren how they value the cholla, undoubtedly they would have an eye-opening perspective to share.

Walk the 1/4-mile loop trail through the cactus garden with the self-guiding nature trail brochure as your guide. See if the cholla cactus "bears any helpful...part in the scheme of things on this planet."



Warning! Unless you are a cactus wren, be careful as you walk the trail. Do not brush against the cholla cactus. The slightest touch can cause the cactus to prick your skin. Removing the spines is difficult. Keep children close.

Pets are not allowed.

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Ocotillo

Don't confuse this unusual-looking plant, ocotillo (*Fouquieria splendens*), for a cactus. The thorny, multi-stem shrub is in fact a woody deciduous plant. Unlike other deciduous shrubs, which normally grow leaves in the spring and drop them in the fall, the ocotillo may grow and drop leaves as often as five times during the year. Its leaves aren't season dependent but rain dependent.

Following a sufficient rain, the ocotillo puts forth a cluster of leaves above each thorn, adorning the otherwise dead-looking canes with a flourish of green. At the same time red blossoms may appear at the tips of the canes. The leaves go about the business of photosynthesis—converting light energy to food energy—until the next drought; then the leaves turn red or brown and drop.

The ocotillo, characteristic of the Colorado Desert, prefers to grow on gravelly slopes of alluvial fans. Flash floods wash sand, gravel, and rocks into the valley floor, creating



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This is looking down on the Coachella Valley from Keyes View. Mt. San Jacinto at 11,000 feet pokes above the clouds. (April 2009)



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