Cactus & succulent books for children

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Cactus & Succulent Books for Children

Introduction

In the world of cacti & succulent (C & S) literature, books suitable for children to young adults have been a little-recognized resource. However, this is a buoyant part of the book market and one we aim to encourage because the young growers and readers of today are tomorrow’s key players in our societies. Hopefully, some will become at least enthusiasts and perhaps experts. A smaller subset may even become plant biology researchers in our chosen field of interest. As far as we are aware, no one has ever systematically considered C & S books for young readers in a formal way, hence this article.

We have both been interested in collecting books on cacti and succulents (C & S) suitable for children through to young adults for many years. Additionally, DS (for the CTCSS, Connecticut CSS) has been selling such material for nearly 30 years. We have gathered together as much information as possible, based principally on our separate extensive book collections which we present here as a summary. Table 1 includes all the children’s books that we are aware of. This will undoubtedly be incomplete but hopefully it is highly representative of the literature available. We consider printed only material and not information available solely in digital form, whether as discs or on websites.

As with adult literature, the range of books for young readers is extensive. Table 1 attempts to classify the books into traditional fiction and educational categories, but there are also other subcategories worthy of attention, such as activity books (including sticker and coloring books), poetry, humor and a single but stunning pop-up book. Some books feature in several categories, so a poetry book, for example, can also be educational. A number of books include glossaries relating primarily to the animals (and some plants) featured in the book.

A particular issue with this literature is that cacti and succulents are often not the main focus of a book: animals frequently take center stage with the succulents playing a subsidiary role in the background. Many general books on plants include succulents but only as part of a broad coverage. We have attempted to indicate this range of coverage in Table 1. In general, children’s books are not available for an extended period of time and as such it is sometimes rather difficult to find them. The pop-up and Bernath’s coloring books are notable exceptions.

The final slightly complex issue is that of reading age. The books in Table 1 cover the full range of literature from books to be read to very young children by adults, through to complex texts that could form part of school curricula and that are actually reference works for advanced young readers or young adults. Often though, the reading age isn’t definable, so we have indicated a range of reading age.

Statistics

Table 1 shows the 116 C & S books for children of which we are currently aware. We make no claims that this represents anywhere near a complete listing of these books ever published on our chosen subject but hopefully it is reasonably representative of what is available as either new or used from second hand book sources. Here are a few key points summarised from Table 1:

- By far the biggest category (82%) is educational, or non-fiction, which includes reference works which would be appropriate for use as part of a formal teaching curriculum. It must be emphasized that some of our categories are not mutually exclusive, since some books in other categories are also educational.
- In contrast 18% are fiction and 15% of the books are based around poetry, with 10% activity and 10% coloring books. Again, the last two categories are often also educational.
- We’re only aware of a single pop-up book (Anon., 1987; Fig. 1).
- Disappointingly, only two books are bi- or trilingual.
- In terms of dates of publication, by far the most productive decade was 1991–2000 when 39% of the titles were first published. Our oldest known book is by Werner (1954).
- The most productive place of publication is, unsurprisingly, the US which accounts for 82% of the titles, with the UK trailing well behind at 14%.
Africa, notably South Africa, has produced just two books on succulents, both on the baobab (Robinson, 2009; Taylor, 2004).

The absence of German language titles is surprising considering the wide interest in succulents, especially cacti, in Germany. Mexico, with its high-level of succulent biodiversity, is also missing from the list of publishing countries. The same applies to the whole of South America.

The only other countries represented in Table 1 are Spain (2 books) and New Zealand (a single title).

Top Ten Favorites

We are highlighting our top 10 books from our longer favorites list. These range from simple activity books through fiction to full reference works that could form part of school curricula. We begin with activity books. Top of the list is the National Geographic (Anon., 1987) *Creatures of the desert world*: the only cactus-focused pop-up book we know. As with many cactus and succulent books, animals take center stage but here the cacti are also highly prominent. Unfortunately, the cover — featuring a hare being chased by a fox — is devoid of cacti and so does not do justice to the cactus content. Each of six double-page spreads is a pop-up 3D view of cacti and animals interacting in habitat (Fig. 1) and is based on amazing paper technology. It’s truly an activity book because not only does the book need to be opened and closed carefully to reveal the 3D scenes but there are also several tabs to be pulled or pushed revealing hidden animals. So, bat wings flap on opening as the animals feed on saguaro flowers; a hare leaps behind a prickly pear; a snake rattles its tail; and a kestrel flies behind a saguaro. There are two paragraphs of text accompanying each double-page spread. Be warned though, this book could easily be damaged by over enthusiastic fingers, so reading this book to a beginner ought to be closely supervised by an adult! This book has been an all-time best seller for DS (CTCSS) with more than 100 copies sold over a 30-year period. We even had one arachnophobe who paid for the book but then insisted that we remove the tarantula from it!

Several children’s books are either sticker or coloring books. The most popular and second-best seller is Bernath’s (1981) *The cactus coloring book* (Fig. 2) which is devoted to cacti. It has soft card covers of which the

rear cover forms a fold-out flap. A significant, nearly unique, and highly popular feature is that the inside front cover and both sides of the rear cover have colored versions of the 45 drawings for the budding artist to use as models. Forty-five species from 40 genera — from both North and South America — are included as line drawings with Latin and common names. Each painting is accompanied by an extended caption or short paragraph describing the species and its cultivation requirements. The introduction is by Carolyn Ripps (former director of the New York CSS), who also contributed the captions. Finally, there is an index of scientific names, so the book also has significant educational merits. The line drawings are attractive and accurate representations of the plants and for artistic merit our favorite is *Astrophytum capricorne* (Goat’s horn cactus).

Fiction is obviously a major category of children’s books. Storad & Jensen’s (2005) *Life in the slow lane — A desert tortoise tale* is an example of many of the books surveyed here, where the animals play a prominent role in the narrative and the cacti are demoted to the background. It’s a poem aimed at beginner readers:

“Come closer, dear Shelley,
I’ll tell you a tale
Of our life in the desert
With cactus and quail.”

The tortoises on the cover (Fig. 3) with their nods to Ninja Turtles, have resulted in this being a very popular title. The book ends with two pages of information on the desert tortoise, including its Latin name, followed by a short glossary, none of which is relevant to succulents.
A second story book is aimed at older readers: Anon. (1993, Ladybird) *Desperate Dan and the cactus-man*. Here, Dan disrupts his peaceful holiday in the desert to save his home town of Cactusville (Fig. 4) from the pranks of the crafty Abominable Cactusman. During the ensuing chase, Dan's Aunt Aggie's cow pie is ruined, which sends Dan into a frenzy. The story is very short, taking an adult reader a mere 5 minutes or so to complete. CCW was delighted to present Gordon Rowley with a copy of this book because *Cactusville* was the name of his house in Reading, England. Several other books feature poetry as opposed to story lines, such as the Jernigan books.

Of the educational books, Table 1 includes four books devoted to the African baobab (*Adansonia digitata*). Of these, Moss & Kennaway’s (2001) *This is the tree – A story of the baobab* (Fig. 5) provides the most attractive cover. The life cycle of the plant is described via a short narrative, this time aimed at beginner readers. The animals associated with baobabs are varied and beautifully illustrated. Most significant are elephants that feed on the bark and fruit, key sources of minerals and water for these giants of the African savannah. Bushbabies feed on the flowers, simultaneously acting as pollinators. Although this is a work of fiction, like many other books covered here, it’s also educational, including a double-page spread describing all aspects of the baobab’s habitat, name, structure and uses by animals and humans.

Another educational book, Hauth & Sather’s (1996) *Night life of the Yucca: The story of a flower and a moth* (Fig. 6) features a *Yucca* in flower on a beautifully presented cover. The book is extremely informative and written with as little technical language as possible. The remaining illustrations are of a high standard, informative and follow the narrative closely. The only disappointing aspect is that all of the inside illustrations are in half tone with no color. This is apparently a nod to the “action” taking place at night with the *Yucca* moth’s nocturnal visit. The last two pages have more educational and somewhat technical details on the plant, flower, moth and their relationships.

Bash (1989) *Desert giant — The world of the saguaro cactus* (Fig. 7) is one of several books that focus on the saguaro and the animals that make their homes amongst its branches. It describes the habitat in the Sonoran Desert. The Gila woodpecker makes its nest in the stem which later becomes a hollowed-out saguaro ‘boot’. Pollination of the flowers by night-visiting bats and day-visiting white-winged doves is beautifully illustrated. The harvest of saguaro fruit by Tohono O’odham Indians is described, together with the production of jams, candies, syrups and wine from the juicy red pulp. The later stages in the saguaro’s life cycle are covered, from ageing through death.
The talent of the author and artist Barbara Bash shines through and brings the saguaro and its intimate relationships with a range of animals to life via an engaging narrative.

Cactus by Lerner (1992) is one of only a very few books that deals with cacti in which animals receive only cursory attention as pollinators, accompanied by a single sketch of a bat. This book is aimed at 12–14 year-olds and could be considered to be a reference book (Fig. 8). Its four chapters are self-explanatory: The cactus stem, The cactus family, How the cactus plant works, and Where the cactus lives. It includes 7 full-page attractive and informative color illustrations based on watercolor paintings, together with several other small half tone illustrations, all of high quality. Latin names are used alongside some common names, but technical terms are kept to an essential minimum. The text is accurate and informative but is now slightly dated: for example, there are now four and not three subfamilies of the cactus family (Cactaceae). The book ends with a glossary and an index, the latter being a rare feature of children’s books.

Socha & Grajkowski’s The book of trees (2018) was first published in Polish as Drzewa [Trees] in 2018, subsequently translated into English and published in London under this title. A year later the American edition appeared as Trees — A rooted history but with a completely new cover featuring 5 succulents (Fig. 9). A unique feature for a child’s book is its small folio format (14.75 × 11 inches; 37.6 × 27.8 cm). Its coverage is very wide ranging, dealing with basic tree facts such as structure, growth through the seasons, seed dispersal, classification, history, uses in human culture and much more. It explores the roles trees play in ecosystems, their evolution (illustrated in a biological family tree) and human family trees (genealogy). It includes trees in art forms (bonsai, topiary, wooden masks), wooden transport, musical instruments, buildings, etc. and ends with a forward look at trees into the future. Succulents are a significant part of the coverage. Tree Opuntia, saguaro, Aloe, Joshua tree and Agave feature in a double-page spread on When is a tree not a tree? Two double-page spreads on Endemic species include many succulents such as dragon trees, ocotillo, the boojum tree, pachypodiums and the Socotran succulent fig [Dorstenia gigas]. Another double-page spread illustrates 9 baobabs. Text and illustrations are superb and our only regret is that an appendix with Latin plant names is missing. This is the most advanced children’s book we consider here for a reading age of 10–14 years, although the publishers believe that much younger children could appreciate with this book. This was the UK Sunday Times Children’s Book 7.

Saguars feature prominently on many titles (Bash, 1989).

8. An example of many educational titles (Lerner, 1992).
of the Week in 2018 when the reviewer said that this book was “Beautiful ... There is humour in the images, and compelling detail and elegant composition”. This book could be considered as a major educational reference source on trees for children.

The final book mentioned here, Walker’s (1971) *Survival under the sun* (Fig. 10), could be considered a textbook and is based on an original story developed for an episode of the US television series *Marlin Perkins’ Wild Kingdom*. With 10 chapters covering topics including the land, plants, snakes, reptiles, birds, mammals and the balanced community, the book comprehensively introduces the reader to the southwestern desert. A detailed index lets the reader check out specific topics and the wonderful watercolor illustrations give life to the narrative. It is certainly a great addition to the library and could be reissued with few alterations necessary to update the text.

**End note**

If anyone reading this article is aware of children’s books missing from Table 1, we would be grateful for any additional information, provided in the form used in Table 1 if at all possible. Thank you.

**Acknowledgements**

Both of our wives, Marjorie Thorburn and Barbara Schultz, have read and commented on earlier drafts.
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<td>Anon. (National Geographic)</td>
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<td>Creatures of the desert world</td>
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<td>A, E (WH), Pu</td>
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<td>Anon. (Ladybird Books)</td>
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<td>Arnold, C.</td>
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<td>A day and night in the desert</td>
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<td>E (BR/WH)</td>
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<td>Arnosky, J.</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Watching desert wildlife</td>
<td>USA</td>
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<td>Arnosky, J.</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Coyote raid in cactus canyon</td>
<td>NYC, NY</td>
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<td>Barlowe, D.</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>The Sonoran Desert by day and night coloring</td>
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<td>Bash, B.</td>
<td>1989</td>
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<td>Bash, B.</td>
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<td>Desert giant. The world of the saguaro cactus</td>
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<td>E (WH)</td>
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<td>Baylor, B. &amp; Baylor, P.</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Desert voices</td>
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<td>Baylor, B. &amp; Parnall, P.</td>
<td>1987</td>
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<td>Benjamin, C.</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Footprints in the cacti</td>
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<td>Berquist, R. &amp; Berquist, S.</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Saguaro cactus (habitats)</td>
<td>Danbury, CT</td>
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<td>Canizares, S.</td>
<td>1998</td>
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<td>Catchpole, C. &amp; McIntyre, B.</td>
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<td>The living world deserts</td>
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<td>Ciraola, S.</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Hug me</td>
<td>London, USA</td>
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<td>Cobb, V.</td>
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<td>This place is dry</td>
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<td>Crazy, L.</td>
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<td>Become an expert. Saguaro cacti and Elf owls</td>
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<td>Dewey, J.O.</td>
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<td>Dunphy, M. &amp; Coe, A.</td>
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<td>Fredericks, A.D.</td>
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<td>I am the desert</td>
<td>Tucson, AZ</td>
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<td>Fredericks, A.D. &amp; DiRubbio, J.</td>
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<td>Around one cactus. Owls, bats and leaping rats</td>
<td>Nevada City, CA</td>
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<td>Fredericks, A.D. &amp; Speangler, K.J.</td>
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<td>Goodrich, C.</td>
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<td>Nobody hugs a cactus</td>
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<td>Gibbons, G.</td>
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<td>Mineola, NY</td>
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<td>Guiberson, B.Z. &amp; Lloyd, M.</td>
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<td>Harrison, P.</td>
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<td>Hatch, T. &amp; Pollard, B.</td>
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<td>Helman, A.</td>
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<td>Holmes, A. &amp; Lerner, C.</td>
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<td>Jernigan, G.</td>
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<td>Jernigan, G.</td>
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<td>Kennedy, P.E.</td>
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<td>Klots, A. &amp; Klots, E.</td>
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<td>The community of living things in the desert</td>
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<td>Kopp, M</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>What do you find on a saguaro cactus?</td>
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<td>Latchana Kenney, K.</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Healing plants (Plant Power)</td>
<td>Minneapolis, MN</td>
<td>A, E (BR/WH), Pl; (includes useful teaching notes)</td>
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<td>Alexandria, VA</td>
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<td>Eden. Planting a paradise</td>
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<td>Madgwick, W.</td>
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<td>Marsh, P. &amp; Brown, C.</td>
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<td>Desert seasons</td>
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<td>Miller, M.</td>
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<td>1982</td>
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<td>Porfirio, G.</td>
<td>2012</td>
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<td>Rabe, T., Ruiz, A. &amp; Mathieu, J.</td>
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<td>2009</td>
<td>Baby baobab</td>
<td>Auckland Park, [Jo-hannesburg, South Africa]</td>
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<td>Snoopy, spike and the cat next door</td>
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<td>Schulz, C.</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Travels with my cactus</td>
<td>NYC, NY</td>
<td>(E (BR))</td>
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<tr>
<td>Silver, D.M. &amp; Wynne, R.J.</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>One small square cactus desert</td>
<td>NYC, NY, etc.</td>
<td>(E (OYO))</td>
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<tr>
<td>Smithey, W.K.</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>American deserts: The beauty of America's natural habitat</td>
<td>NYC, NY</td>
<td>(An, E (OYO))</td>
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<tr>
<td>Socha, P. &amp; Graftkowski, W.</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Trees. A rooted history (translated from Polish 2018 ed.)</td>
<td>NYC, NY</td>
<td>(E (OYO), PI (folio format; cover different to UK ed.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spencer, G.</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>The living desert – Let's take a trip</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>(An, E (WH))</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spengler, K.</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Wild desert coloring book</td>
<td>Flagstaff, AZ</td>
<td>(C, E (BR))</td>
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<tr>
<td>Steiner, B.A. &amp; Himler, R.</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Desert trip</td>
<td>San Francisco, CA</td>
<td>(An, F (OYO))</td>
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<tr>
<td>Storad, C.J.</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Saguaro cactus</td>
<td>Minneapolis, MN</td>
<td>(E (WH))</td>
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<td>Storad, C.J.</td>
<td>1999–2009</td>
<td>Lizards for lunch</td>
<td>Tempe, AZ</td>
<td>(E, (BR), P, P)</td>
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<td>Storad, C.J.</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Desert night shift: A pack rat story</td>
<td>Tempe, AZ</td>
<td>(E (BR/WH), F, P)</td>
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<td>Taylor, B.</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Inside guides. Incredible plants</td>
<td>London, etc.</td>
<td>(E (OYO), PI)</td>
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<td>Taylor, J.</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>A baobab is big &amp; other verses from Africa</td>
<td>Cape Town, South Africa</td>
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<td>Tweit, S.J.</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Meet the wild southwest</td>
<td>Portland, OR</td>
<td>(An, E (OYO))</td>
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<td>Wadsworth, G.</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Desert discoveries</td>
<td>Watertown, MA</td>
<td>(An, E (BR/WH))</td>
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<td>Walker, L.W.</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Survival under the sun</td>
<td>Garden City, NY</td>
<td>(E (OYO))</td>
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<td>Ward, J. &amp; Ranger, M.K.</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>The seed and the giant cactus</td>
<td>Flagstaff, AZ</td>
<td>(E (BR), P)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Welles, P.</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Meet the desert southwest</td>
<td>Tucson, AZ</td>
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<td>Werner, J.</td>
<td>1954</td>
<td>Walt Disney's living desert. A true-life adventure</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>(E (OYO), F)</td>
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<td>Williamson, B.</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Cactus and flower: A book about life cycles</td>
<td>NYC, NY</td>
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<td>Willoughby, J. &amp; Willoughby, S.</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Cactus country. A friendly introduction to cacti of the southwest deserts</td>
<td>Phoenix, AZ</td>
<td>(Ca, E (OYO), H, R (also includes succulents other than cacti)</td>
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<td>Wright-Frensen, V.</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>A desert scrapbook. Dawn to dusk in the Sonoran Desert</td>
<td>NYC, NY</td>
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<td>Zohfeld, K.W. &amp; Mirocha, P.</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Cactus Café. A story of the Sonoran Desert</td>
<td>Norwalk, CT</td>
<td>(E (WH), F)</td>
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