***Carnegiea gigantea*, Cactus of the Year 2017**

What is the most recognizable plant of the Sonoran Desert? Have you run into the “Western cactus”? Its flower is the official state flower of Arizona and for decades its imposing silhouette has been the emblem of the German Cactus Society (Deutsche Kakteen-Gesellschaft e.V., DKG). It is the *Carnegiea gigantea*, and is also called the Saguaro or Sahuaro in colloquial speech.

The species was discovered about 50 years before the DKG was founded and described as *Cereus giganteus*. Now, on the occasion of the society’s 125-year anniversary *Carnegiea gigantea* has been declared Cactus of the Year for 2017.

The plants grow in the United States in Arizona, in southern California west of the Colorado River and in the federal state of Sonora in Mexico in altitudes between 180 and 1350 meters. The greatest number of plants can be found in Arizona near Tucson and in the Saguaro National Park.
The distribution area in the Sonoran desert is restricted by drought as well as frost. These occur rather frequently in higher altitudes and are harmful to the plants. The root system that is spread just under the surface of the ground can take up the slightest precipitation very quickly. A deep tap root provides for its stability. In its home localities, the cactus is not only deeply rooted in the ground but also in the culture and tradition. To the natives of the Sonoran desert, its fruits serve as nutrition and for the preparation of wine while the wood of the dead plants is used as construction material.

The flowering season between May and June is just before the beginning of the great summer rains. Pollinators include insects, bats, and several birds; and the fruits are 6-9 cm in diameter with a red juicy pulp containing up to 2000 seeds. In addition, woodpeckers build their nesting cavities in the saguaro trunks. And due to the lack of tall trees birds of prey use the branches of the saguaro as a look-out, and the cactus offers the only protection for their eyries.

In their natural habitats *Carnegiea gigantea* can live up to 200 years. The most challenging growth stage is during adolescence when growth is extremely slow and plants are eaten by packrats, bighorn sheep and desert hares. In nature ten-year-old plants are only 4 cm high! *Carnegiea gigantea* reaches flowering age at 50-75 years and a height of 3-4 m; the first branches occur at an age of about 65 years at a height of approximately 6 m.

Though the species produces plenty of seeds, its survival is endangered. Between 1942 and 1961 a bacterial disease caused by *Erwinia carnegieana* destroyed about 30% of the population. However, in the Red List of endangered species of the IUCN the species is listed as “Least Concern (LC)”, i.e. not endangered.

Tips for cultivation:

Under ideal cultivation conditions, the plants can grow quicker than in nature. After 10 years they may reach a height of 10 cm.

Seeds of *Carnegiea gigantea*,like all cacti need light exposure to germinate. The seeds germinate within 14-28 days at about 20°C.

The substrate should be well drained and dry out quickly. In winter the plants should be kept dry and not too cold. Frost can cause growth interruption or even a complete plant loss. In mid-summer, young plants should be slightly shaded from the sun, older plants can be fully exposed to the sun.