

The Monster that Age Sun City West – *Pachycereus weberi*

By Jim Elliott

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Columnar cactus have always been one of my favorites, but there is very little written about them as most locales cannot grow them outside. Columnar cacti dominate cold climate greenhouses if given free root run. As a result we have many really great books on the ‘short rounds’ of our hobby and not much on columnars. This article plans to illuminate one of the lesser known columnars that flourish in our landscapes.

Early this year we purchased a yard full of cactus in Sun City west with the dominant plant being a specimen *Pachycereus weberi*. This beauty was about 20 feet by 20 feet and leaning about 10 degrees off vertical towards the neighboring property. It had many, many arms which undoubtedly clouded my judgment as I visualized propagating a rarely offered plant for our customers. After dealing with this plant, I have a better idea of why it is “rarely offered.” This monster has the toughest, woodiest structure I have ever dealt with. It dwarfs the skeleton of the saguaro as might be expected with the world’s largest cactus. I wore out four of the best pruning saws I could buy just making cuttings. Every arm had to be secured with a choker strap held up by our truck crane as their spination is just too intense to handle by hand. Some of these individual arms were 12 feet long and close to 400 pounds. Obviously that is way too large to plant so we had to lower them to the ground and shorten them. During one of these lowering operations, I was momentarily distracted and let the crane rotate too far. As I stopped the rotation, the cutting oscillated and tapped the side of the truck. Oops. As I walked up to the cutting the outside dual tire was hissing like a snake. The source of the hissing was a central spine of the cutting imbedded in a \$300 tire. I pulled it out a little and the hissing increased so I pushed the spine back into the hole. We made it back to Chandler on five good tires and one throwing a hissy fit.

After most of a growing season, a few of the cuttings are rooted and none have given up entirely. We have ‘snowed’ them with a spray that increases their reflectivity to ward off sunburn. Maybe with a couple of years and some good luck, we will be able to sell this “rarely offered” species. Another example of why cactus propagation is still a get Rich Slow process. When they are ready we will have a beautiful bluish columnar to sell that will be the envy of your neighborhood. Not just any neighborhood. It will have to be a neighborhood with large yards. With good luck I will be retired or dead before each of these cuttings emulates their magnificent ancestor. Actually as each of these plants will be the past as well as the present—they are technically just a reincarnation of themselves. Hmmm? I better go back to growing cactus than fooling around with philosophy.

Pachycereus weberi have very few ribs, as few as eight or nine, but these ribs are enormously strong as the fibrous parts take up most of the cross-sectional area of each stem. New stems erupt from the outside or even the bottom of the stems and then immediately go vertical. This process puts enormous torsion stresses on the cactus structure necessitating the very strong woody growth to hold it up. I had seen a specimen

P. Weberi in Hawaii in the early 1980's at the Plantation Gardens on Kauai but really did not check out the structure. The overall impression was overwhelming. As you probably have gathered by now, our Sun City plant had rapidly progressed from a wonderful "opportunity" to a living nightmare. I had agreed to remove the cactus completely and after the 50 or 60 usable cuttings were secured there was this enormous trunk left to deal with. Our three man crew labored for about three hours with every tool we had and the stump was still vertical. Finally with time running out I decided to use a bigger hammer by backing into the trunk with our two-ton truck. The first attempt yielded very little movement and nothing broken on the truck. Two more times using the Ford as a battering ram and the trunk was over. Success!

Not so fast, Jim. The crane has a 1,100 pound limit and could not lift the trunk. Another hour of cleaning all the dirt off the roots and shortening the stubs even more passed before we could lift the monster with constant creaking and groaning noises from the crane. Back at the Nursery the next day I gleefully rolled the truncated monster off the flatbed into our dumpster. Good riddance. Like a bed penny, it came back. The driver of the garbage truck would not take it! He nearly ruined his truck's hydraulics fishing the cactus stump back out of the dumpster. That was in February. We finally cut and chopped the trunk into two parts and placed the bottom half into a nearly empty dumpster where it could not be seen by the driver. One of our employees took a real liking to the top part and has stripped all of the "meat" off the bones. It is still an impressive trophy after all these months and hundreds of hours of work. He lives in a small apartment so I suspect the trunk will be on display right where it sits for the foreseeable future. Any interested parties are welcome to view it at Arizona Cactus Sales in Chandler. It really did not 'eat' Sun City West, but it chewed a considerable hole in our budget.