

California Believes Clams, Crabs and Bumblebees Are Fish, Does It Now Believe That Joshua Trees Are a Type of Asparagus?

Article By:

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California law sometimes adopts an odd view of the natural world. For example, California considers clams and crabs to be fish. Cal. Fish & Game Code § 45. See [In California, A Snail Is Sometimes A Fish And A Goldfish Isn't](#). Then the Court of Appeal declared a bumblebee to be a fish. See [California Court Declares A Bumblebee To Be A Fish](#). Now, the California legislature is suggesting that Joshua trees may be kin to asparagus.

On July 10, 2023, the Governor signed the [Western Joshua Tree Conservation Act](#), 2023 Cal. Stats. ch. 51, into law. This new law defines "Western Joshua Tree" as "means *Yucca brevifolia*, an evergreen, tree-like plant that has been treated as a member of the asparagus family (*Asparagaceae*)".

For those who have never seen a Joshua tree, they are difficult to describe. Although they reach arborescent heights (15 to 30 feet), they do not have bark and their leaves are stiff and clustered at the end of their branches. It would be difficult to find any shade under a Joshua tree. Captain John C. Frémont (aka the Pathfinder) was not impressed, describing them in the first English description of the plant as "the most repulsive tree in the vegetable kingdom". In others, a Joshua tree sighting turned their thoughts to the Bible. When Brigham Young in 1857 summoned the Latter-Day Saints living in San Bernardino, California to Deseret, the Saints traveled through the Cajon Pass into a Joshua tree forest in the area of what is today Victorville, California. To the Saints, the Joshua tree reminded them of Joshua leading the Israelite tribes into the promised land. *Joshua*. Hence, this *Yucca* with short leaves (*brevifolia* means short leaves) was christened the Joshua tree.

Joshua trees are useful altimeters. In my hikes in Nevada, I can generally determine the altitude by the plants. Thus, I know that I am somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000 feet whenever I encounter Joshua trees.

When I was studying the taxonomy of vascular plants more than four decades ago, the Joshua tree was considered to be a member of the same plant family as lilies (*Liliaceae*). Science has apparently moved on and now the Joshua tree is in fact considered to be a member of the *Asparagaceae* family. In this one case, therefore, the California legislature may not be far off the mark when it related Joshua trees to asparagus. However, I would not recommend trying to eat a Joshua tree, although they were

a favorite food of the now extinct giant ground sloth. I remember as a boy exploring a cave filled with crystals and fossilized sloth dung (no doubt containing digested Joshua tree), but that adventure is another story.

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