



Agaves

Agaves are attractive desert succulents that are also known as century plants. They get this name from the mistaken belief that they only flower after 100 years. In reality, the flowering cycle usually takes closer to 10 to 20 years. They produce the magnificent flowers on long stalks which attract bats, birds, and insects that also act as pollinators. To watch the agave flowering is truly amazing. The stalk begins to bolt skyward from the rosette and soon looks like an asparagus stalk. This happens so fast, you can literally watch it grow (or so it seems). Once they reach full height (up to 20 feet), the flowers open and produce fruit, seedpods open, then individual plants fade and die. The dead flower stalks are also attractive and can remain standing for one or two years.

Agaves have fleshy, strap-shaped leaves with spiny or smooth margins. They form basal clumps, and on the spiny species, the exposed leaf surfaces are imprinted with the texture of the spines. Several showy species from Mexico are commonly planted in low desert landscapes. Our local native species are excellent choices for native and low water-use landscapes although you may have to search them out at specialty nurseries or botanical gardens.

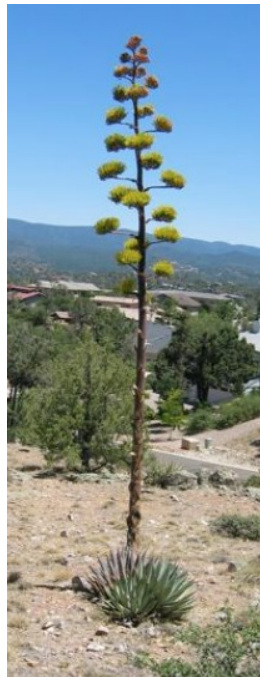
Agaves are in the lily family and are closely related to yucca, beargrass, and sotol (desert spoon). One species, called the "shin dagger," actually looks quite a bit like a yucca. Many species of agave reproduce vegetatively as well as from seed. The vegetative "pups" appear at the base of the mother plant. Other agave species produce bulbils (plantlets) on their flowering stalks. The bulbils and pups can be removed with a sharp, clean knife and planted in a well-drained, sandy soil medium. The wounds should be allowed to dry and "scab over" for several days before planting and the soil medium should be watered infrequently to avoid rot.

Agaves have also given indigenous peoples food, beverage, and fiber for thousands of years. The pit-roasted heart of the agave was an important food source to Native Americans and the rock-lined roasting pits can be found near agave stands in the local area. Sisal comes from a Mexican species. Pulque is an intoxicating beverage made from the fermented juice of the hearts of certain agave species. Further distillation yields tequila and mescal. Other species are used as emmenagogues, laxatives, and diuretics.

Most of the large agaves (rosettes 5-7 ft high and 8-12 ft across) found in landscape plantings of the low desert areas are *Agave americana*. These have a gray-green leaf blade, but *A. americana* 'Marginata' has creamy yellow leaf margins. Both of these are very common, but will get freeze damage when temperatures dip into the teens (F). It is suitable for most areas of Yavapai county, but the freeze damage is persistent and unattractive. Also keep in mind the large size of this plant and avoid planting it near paths, sidewalks, and other areas where it could wound passersby.

Our local species, *Agave parryi*, is found in the mountains between 4,500 and 8,000 feet. Some nice stands can be seen along 89A on the slopes both above and below Jerome. It is the hardiest agave and has a large, tight, cabbage-like rosette. A larger, more robust cousin to our local agave is *Agave parryi* var. *Huachucensis*. It is a native of southern Arizona and Sonora. *Agave palmeri* has a narrower leaf and more delicate flower stalk. *Agave utahensis* is the northernmost species and has a tall, but more compact flower stalk.

Remember, these plants are protected in the wild. If you are transporting them, be prepared to show your Arizona Department of Agriculture collecting permit and have your tags attached to the plants. Otherwise, look forward to a citation. Seriously, plant thieves are prosecuted to the full extent of the law



Agave parryi, rosette (above), flower stalk (right). Yavapai Native and Naturalized Plant Database.

Additional Resources

[Cactus, Agave, Yucca, and Ocotillo](#), University of Arizona Cooperative Extension

[Problems and Pests of Agave, Aloe, Cactus and Yucca](#) , University of Arizona Cooperative Extension

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