

Ah, Those Amazing Agaves

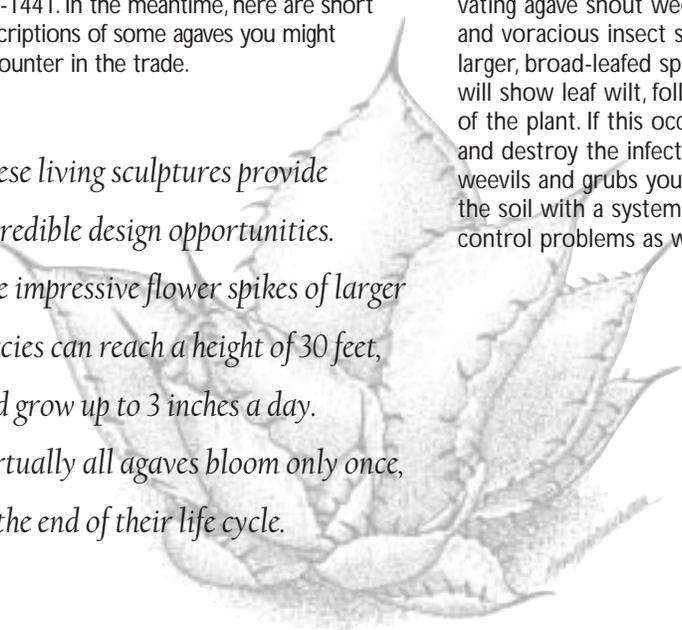
Agaves can be intimidating. Not because of their wicked terminal spines or prickly teeth, but because there are so many (over 300 species), and they are so hard to keep straight! These living sculptures provide incredible design opportunities, but how can the average person sort through all of the available species to find the best one for their situation? Take heart; help is available! Mary and Gary Irish's great book, *Agaves, Yuccas, and Related Plants*, can be ordered from Timber Press at (800) 327-5680, or go online at www.timberpress.com. True agave lovers might also want to invest in Dr. Howard Gentry's encyclopedia, *Agaves of Continental North America*. This terrific resource was out of print for many years, but is now available from the University of Arizona Press. To order, call (520) 621-1441. In the meantime, here are short descriptions of some agaves you might encounter in the trade.

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First, some general information about this fascinating genus. Virtually all agaves bloom only once, at the end of their life cycle. Maturation time varies with species and cultural practices, but generally ranges from 8 to 25 years. You really can kill these plants with kindness; ample fertilization and irrigation can cause plants to mature more rapidly. The impressive flower spikes of larger species can reach a height of 30 feet, and grow up to 3 inches a day. Some species produce pups to keep the population going, while others are solitary. Agaves prefer full sun to filtered shade, deep and infrequent irrigation, and require well-drained soil. They are ideal choices for containers or shallow planters with limited soil volume. Agaves are relatively problem-free, except for the aggravating agave snout weevil. This destructive and voracious insect seems to prefer the larger, broad-leafed species. Infested plants will show leaf wilt, followed by total collapse of the plant. If this occurs, promptly remove and destroy the infected plant, as well as any weevils and grubs you can find. Drenching the soil with a systemic insecticide can help control problems as well.





Agave colorata



Agave vilmoriniana

Agave americana (Century Plant)

This granddaddy of agaves certainly makes a statement! It is relatively fast growing, to about 6 feet tall by 8-10 feet wide. The wide, grey leaves have stiff terminal spines and recurved teeth along the margins. It is hardy to about 15° F. Unfortunately, it is the most popular menu item for the agave snout weevil. *Agave americana* var. *marginata* has creamy yellow stripes along the leaf margins.

Agave americana var. *mediopicta*

This plant has been around for a long time, but it hasn't been widely available. In fact, quantities are still somewhat limited, so be sure to check availability if you plan to use large numbers. This selection of *Agave americana* has a wide cream-colored stripe down the center of the blue-green leaves. The leaves have a wonderful arching form, similar to that of Octopus agave (*Agave vilmoriniana*). The leaves are armed with a stout terminal spine, and have teeth along the margins. This selection seems to be smaller in stature than the regular *Agave americana*, to about 4 feet tall and wide. It prefers full sun and well-drained soil, and performs well in containers. It is hardy to at least 15° F. As with nearly all agaves, blooming signals the end of the plant's life cycle. However, this variety produces pups (offsets) to keep the population going.

Agave angustifolia var. *marginata*

Native to tropical Costa Rica and Mexico, this light green and cream variegated agave is cold-hardy to about 25° F. The stiff leaves are about 1 1/2 inches wide, with creamy yellow stripes along the margins. This species forms clumps to 3 feet tall and wide. It tolerates full sun, reflected heat, and part shade exposures. However, the plant looks best when grown in filtered shade.

Agave bovicornuta (Cow's horn agave)

Cow's horn agave is one of the most ornamental agave species in cultivation. This fast-growing plant has broad dark green leaves that are edged with decorative brown teeth. This solitary agave reaches a mature size of 3-4 feet tall and wide. Since full sun or reflected heat exposures can result in some sunburn on the leaves, a filtered shade exposure is ideal. It is cold-hardy to the high teens.

Agave colorata

This medium-sized agave forms low clumps, to 3 feet tall by 4 feet across. Its striking blue-grey leaves are short and broad, with intricate markings. They are edged with large, dark brown teeth. Native to Sonora, Mexico, this plant is reliably cold-hardy to 15° F. It has a slow to moderate growth rate, and thrives in full sun and reflected heat exposures.

Agave desmettiana

Often confused with Octopus agave, this fast-growing plant is smaller in stature, to about 3 feet tall and wide. Its soft, fleshy leaves are light green in color, and have no teeth along the margins. However, the leaves do have a stout terminal spine. Although it can tolerate full sun and reflected heat, it looks more attractive in filtered shade exposures. It is hardy to about 25° F. There is also a selection, *Agave desmettiana* 'Variegata', with a narrow band of yellow along the leaf margins. Both selections sucker prolifically.

... ah, those amazing agaves!



Agave desmettiana

Agave geminiflora (Twin-flowered agave)

Winner of the popularity contest, this versatile agave tolerates a wide range of exposures, from full sun to full shade. Twin-flowered agave is a solitary plant, rapidly forming a 3-4 foot symmetrical rosette of narrow, dark green leaves. The smooth leaves have a terminal spine, and the margins are often edged with fine white fibers. When grown in some shade the leaves are arching and flexible, so the terminal spines are not a big safety concern. It is hardy to about 25° F.

Agave havardiana

This small agave is native to rocky grasslands in west Texas and northern Mexico, at elevations of 4000 to 6000 feet. The stout grey leaves are armed with marginal teeth and a sharp terminal spine. Single plants can reach a size of 2 feet 6 inches tall by 4 feet wide, and occasionally produce offsets. It is quite cold-hardy, to at least 10° F, and prefers full sun exposures.



Agave parryi var. truncata (Artichoke agave)

Agave murpheyi

Those of you in cold climates will appreciate Agave murpheyi's ability to tolerate temperatures down to at least 10° F. This Arizona native has narrow grey-green leaves, reaches a medium size of 3 feet tall and wide, and produces offsets. Plant Agave murpheyi in full sun for best growth and form.

Agave ocahui

This cold-hardy native of Sonora, Mexico, handles temperatures to at least 10° F. Symmetrical and compact, this attractive agave forms a tight rosette to 3 feet tall and wide. To ensure a tight, compact form, plant it in full sun or reflected heat exposures and water sparingly. Its stiff, dark green leaves are about 1 inch wide, with smooth margins and a sharp terminal spine. Agave ocahui does not produce offsets.



Agave bovicornuta (Cow's horn agave)

Agave palmeri (Palmer agave)

This high-elevation agave tolerates temperatures as low as 10° F, and probably lower. It forms compact rosettes to 3 feet tall by 4 feet wide. The blue-green lance-shaped leaves are 2 feet long by 4 inches wide, with reddish teeth along the margins. This plant is solitary in the wild, but sometimes produces offsets under cultivation. At the end of its life cycle Agave palmeri will send up a spectacular branched flower stalk to 10 to 18 feet tall. Plant Agave palmeri in full sun and well-drained soil, and away from high traffic areas, as its terminal spines are wicked. Like other agaves and yuccas, this species is susceptible to the agave snout weevil.

Agave parrasana

This cold-hardy little agave is native to Coahuila, Mexico, at elevations from 4500 to 8000 feet. It is very similar in appearance and growth habit to the more common Agave parryi. This solitary plant forms a tight rosette 2 feet tall and wide. The stout grey leaves are edged with small teeth, and end in a sharp spine. It is cold hardy to at least 10° F, and tolerates full sun exposures.

Agave parryi var. truncata (Artichoke agave)

Many people have fallen head over heels for this plant after seeing it growing at the Huntington Botanical Garden. The dense symmetrical form and wide blue-grey leaves make this one of the most ornamental agaves available. Found only along the Durango-Zacatecas border in Mexico, this agave grows in grasslands at 7500 feet in elevation, and is hardy to about 10° F. Although this agave forms large colonies, individual plants will grow to about 3 feet tall and wide. Plant in full sun or light shade.



Agave ocahui

Agave scabra (Rough leafed agave)

Agave scabra has thick, wide, gray-green leaves that are rough on the back. The leaves are edged with recurved teeth and end in a stout terminal spine. Although there is great variation in the wild, the selection we are growing forms a rosette to 3-4 feet tall and wide, and suckers freely. It is a smaller alternative to Agave americana. Agave scabra is abundant in the Chihuahuan Desert region of northeastern Mexico, from elevations of 3600 to 5700 feet. Plants will thrive in full sun and reflected heat. Agave scabra is hardy to at least 15° F.

Agave schidigera Durango Delight™

Durango Delight™ is a compact, symmetrical selection with great ornamental appeal. This single agave forms a dense rosette of bright green, swordlike leaves to 2 inches tall by 3 feet wide. The smooth-edged leaves are decorated with white markings and marginal fibers, and end in a sharp spine. It thrives in full sun exposures, but can also tolerate light shade. It is hardy to at least 17° F.

Agave sisalana (Hemp plant)

Sisal, or hemp, is one of the most widely-produced natural fibers in the world. This agave is a major crop in Chiapas, Mexico, where it is believed to have originated. It is also a striking ornamental plant, producing bold rosettes of wide green leaves. Be sure to allow this agave plenty of room to develop. It grows quickly to at least 6 feet tall and wide. The leaves have no teeth, but do have a sharp spine at the tip. Agave sisalana is only hardy to about 25° F.

Agave victoria-reginae (Queen Victoria agave)

This petite agave is one of the best choices for containers or small planting areas. Its short, stout leaves are deep green with white markings, and form a tight rosette to 18 inches across. Queen Victoria agave is very slow-growing and long-lived, taking many years to reach flowering size. Plant it in full sun and water sparingly to maintain the tightest form. Hardy to at least 10° F, this species is native to the Chihuahuan Desert, at elevations from 4000 to 5000 feet.

Agave vilmoriniana (Octopus agave)

The most user-friendly agave, this fast-growing species is completely unarmed and can be used in pedestrian areas. Its unusual light green, arching and twisted leaves have made it a favorite of landscape designers. Octopus agave forms a loose, open, single rosette to 5-6 feet tall and wide. It is cold hardy to about 25° F.



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