



## Yuccas

by Sue Rideout, UC Master Gardener

Our Central Valley's dry summer climate provides perfect conditions for yucca plants, a group of perennial tree-like plants and shrubs native to the new world, both North and South America. Yuccas, with more than 40 species and hybrids, are members of the Agavaceae family. Since they have more cold tolerance than agaves, yuccas have a wider range.

Yuccas grow in two major forms: tree-like plants with one or several branching trunks and rosette shaped shrubs. Most have cream to white bell-like flowers borne in panicles on long stems. The flowers are often quite spectacular and long lived.



Stemless rosette- shaped Bear Grass:  
*Yucca filamentosa*

The tree-like yuccas include the Joshua tree which grows in forests in the southern California desert and requires a narrow set of soil and climate conditions. Other large yuccas which thrive in Central Valley climate include:

- **Spanish Bayonet** (*Y. aloifolia*) grows slowly to ten feet with a single or branching trunk. It has rough surfaced, sharp pointed, dark green leaf blades which can reach over two feet in length. The variegated forms are the most popular in cultivation and bear dense clusters of cream colored flowers.
- **Soaptree** (*Y. elata*) is a great landscape specimen. A short, slow-growing yucca with a branching habit, it sports many round heads of light green leaves and spikes of white flowers.
- **Yucca rostrata** is a striking single-trunked tree to ten feet with a sphere of variegated leaves, a trunk with soft gray fibers and spring clusters of white blooms.
- **Spanish Dagger** (*Y. filamentosa*) or soft tipped yucca is native to the Southeast but hybrids grow here. It forms multiple trunks with mounded foliage up to 8 feet in both bright green and variegated varieties.



Tree-like yuccas include  
Soaptree (*Y. elata*)

Rosette shaped yuccas for our area include:

- **Bear Grass** or Adam's Needle is a stemless variety which is the most-cold hardy of yuccas. The rosette is formed of relatively soft green or variegated leaves which curve downward making a mound of up to 5 feet wide and 3 feet tall. In spring and summer it produces a rather spectacular 4 to 7 foot stem of creamy bell-like flowers in clusters.

- **Our Lord's Candle** (*Yucca whipplei*), is another rosette type with a striking flower stalk up to 20 feet high. Anyone who has traveled up the Sierras has gawked at this yucca. It will also grow in our Valley with a swirl of narrow light green leaves. This yucca dies after flowering but really goes out with a flourish! Its rosette of leaves grow for several years and are quite ornamental. New plants come up from seed or offsets.



Yuccas can be grown as single specimen plants in the landscape or grouped with other plants with similar cultural requirements. Agaves, cacti, and yuccas group well together in a desert garden. Yuccas need full sun, well-drained soil and little summer water, only occasional soakings. Because of the sharp needles at the tip of most yuccas, they should not be planted near where people walk or children play.

In my desert garden I have Spanish Bayonet, Adam's Needle, and Our Lord's Candle interspersed with two agaves and several types of cacti. This little garden is a really carefree space for me, requiring only a little spring weed control and occasional summer watering. If you have a dry, sunny spot, consider this type of garden for easy care and stark architectural beauty.

Our Lord's Candle (*Yucca whipplei*) is a common plant in the Sierra foothills.

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