

Spineless Century Plant

Lemoine Waite, Master Gardener, June 5, 2023

Q: Seaming overnight one of the plants in my landscape developed a 17-foot-tall flower stalk. It has not bloomed like this before; can you tell me what type of plant this is? See attached pictures of the flower.

A: Your plant looks like a spineless century plant, *Agave attenuate*. Agave plants are succulents that have stiff leaves with sharp points on the end but a few, like your plant, have soft leaves without pointy tips. There are over 250 species of Agave, most are large, growing up to ten feet tall and wide, but a few can be smaller growing less than 6 inches across.

Agaves are native to the American southwest and Mexico and are a very drought tolerant plant requiring little water once established. They will grow in almost any soil as long as they have good drainage but prefer more sandy soils. They do best in our hot climate if they have protection from afternoon sun but need at least 6 hours of sunlight to look their best. They should not be fertilized as this will encourage them to flower. Once the agave plant flowers it will die, however most plants will grow “pups” (baby plants) off the side of the dying mother plant. It can take up to a year or longer for the mother plant to die and the “pups” to grow. The large mother plant and dry flower stalk can be difficult to remove from the landscape due to the size and the thick fibrous makeup of the stalk, leaves and roots.

The century plant (*Agave americana*) is the agave most commonly used in local landscapes; these plants are large, bold looking succulents well suited for low water use landscapes. The plants can grow 6 to 10 feet across and produce large flower stocks reaching 25 feet tall that resemble something Dr. Seuss might have drawn for a tree. The century plant typically only lives 10 to 15 years in our climate before blooming and then slowly dying. While the leaf sap of the century plants is notorious for causing skin irritations, the sap from the young flower stocks can be used to make distilled liquor. However, the agaves that are used for this purpose and grown as agricultural crops are the blue agave (*Agave azul*) and green maguey (*Agave salmiana*). The distilled liquors made from these two species are tequila and mezcal, they are also used to make agave syrup.

Agaves can be grown as house plants but require a spot with sunlight or bright light to look their best and should be potted in a cactus soil mix. They are slow growing and have shallow root systems so a shallow pot with plenty of drainage holes works well. They should only be watered when completely dry and not watered at all during the winter months.