



Christina Mild  
**RIO DELTA WILD**

“Maguey’s infrequent blooms may outgrow mature palms.”

#### FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Agave americana*

Common Names: Maguey

Family: Agavaceae (Maguey)

#### **Maguey is Gorgeous in Summer’s Heat**

Enormous Magueys began blooming in early June at the former Antonio’s Restaurant in Harlingen, west of Loop 499 between Harrison and Tyler St. The bloom stalks are much higher than “an elephant’s eye.” They’re taller than enormous *Washingtonia* palms nearby.

It’s hard to say whether this Maguey, *Agave americana*, is truly native to the Rio Grande Delta. Certainly, it has grown wild along coastal roads longer than most of us have been alive. If it’s become invasive, I don’t know where.

*Agave americana* is considered to be native to gravelly hills in extreme south Texas.

Linnaeus used *Agave americana* to describe the genus in 1753. “It is the most cosmopolitan of agaves with the longest ornamental history. Although highly variable, it is always large, often with numerous offsets.” (Mary & Gary Irish, *Agaves, Yuccas & Related Plants*, 2000.)

Agaves are difficult to identify with certainty, as they hybridize easily and have been cultivated around the globe for centuries. *Agave americana* “is a polymorphic species with many forms and cultivars... ‘Marginata’ leaves have yellow edges; ‘Variegata’ has twisted yellow and green leaves; ‘Striata’ has yellow or white lined leaves; and ‘Medio-picta’ has a yellow stripe running down the center of the leaf.” (Cheatham & Johnston’s *Useful Wild Plants of Texas*, 1995.) These many forms make the plant popular with landscapers, especially for xeriscapes.

Indigenous cultures have employed many species of agave in a multitude of ways. Food, medicine, soap, cordage, insulation and building materials are a short list of how these plants benefit man. *Useful Wild Plants of Texas* includes an exhaustive accounting of historic use, detailed recipes and recent field trials for commercial production.

These plants have been moved about intentionally and unintentionally for centuries, as even the seeds were consumed by man.

All agaves are native to the Americas; nine of 250 are native to Texas.

During the dry months of summer, *Agave americana* seems ideally suited to the local climate. If you’re in the mood to plant something right now, this plant will survive, even prosper, in summer’s heat and drought.

Beautifully sculpted leaves are protected from water loss by a moisture-retaining epidermis. Protection from hungry animals is two-fold. Leaf edges are lined with sharp thorns. Sap from an injured leaf is highly caustic to skin and probably more so to the mouth.

Despite those forms of protection, humans have used Maguey for centuries as food. The central fleshy core is pit-baked for an extended time and consumed in various ways. Just prior to blooming, the plant produces a nutritious sap, *aguamiel*, with higher calcium content than milk. Fermenting within a day, this becomes *pulque*, a popular beverage.

From a landscaping standpoint, agaves are perfect for dry areas for several reasons. In drought, the stem shrivels to create a small opening in the soil. Each and every leaf in the basal rosette is sculpted to catch moisture and funnel it quickly to the roots.

Agaves show few outward signs of wilting in even the hottest weather. They will be beautiful whether you venture outdoors to water them or not. They will also be beautiful throughout our winter. *Agave americana* withstands temperatures as low as 15 degrees F. and probably lower.

Most plants bloom only once, usually after ten years of growth. Blooming follows late spring and summer rains, usually from June through August. Yellow blooms on an elaborate stalk

mature to form three chambers of dry, flat black seeds. After blooming, the plant will generally die.

This becomes a bit of a problem, as such a sizable and well-armed plant is difficult to remove and a bit of an eyesore. *Agave americana* can grow to be ten feet high and thirteen feet wide. The bloom stalk itself may be 26 ft. in height. The dead bloom stalk makes an intriguing Christmas tree.



Although removal of dead agaves is quite a problem, it should not occur more often than

every ten years. This pales in comparison to daily watering of popular blooming annuals and weekly mowing of a lawn.

The mature size of *Agave americana* should be carefully considered before planting. A small pup placed too near a walkway quickly grows outwards, spearing unwitting pedestrians.

Agaves are especially good candidates for planting on hillsides, to catch available moisture and prevent erosion. They will spread by rhizomes; soon there will be dozens around the original.

They are also good candidates for revegetation of overgrazed lands. Grass seedlings become established in the shade and protection of agave leaves. As lower leaves die and decay, they release organic matter and saponins. Saponins act as a wetting agent by lessening the surface tension of water, allowing more water to soak into the soil rather than running off.

Anyone who has tried to clean unwanted grasses around large agaves can readily believe the



claim that grasses grow especially well around them. This is an important caution to the landscaper: use adequate weed block, plant attractive groundcover, or be prepared to battle guinea grass!

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