

Agaves – The Good, The Bad and The Ugly

*(Modified from an article originally printed in “Gatherings,”
the newsletter for volunteers at the Desert Botanical Garden)*

By Tom Gatz

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THE GOOD: I love agaves. I can't imagine a desert garden without them. In fact, I spend almost every Wednesday morning at the Desert Botanical Garden (mostly leaning on my shovel) watching agave horticulturalist Chad Davis and volunteer Chris Jagmin nurture them. Agaves contrast wonderfully with softer, leafy desert plants and they add bold, architectural statements to our southwest landscapes that our northern gardener friends would kill for. I especially like the symmetry of their rosettes. It calms me just looking at them. They come in all sizes and vary in color from deep green to almost white. Some of my favorites for the landscape are *Agave macroacantha* (small); *A. parryi* var. *truncate* and *A. colorata* (medium); and *A. salmiana* (large). I also like to showcase *A. bracteosa*, *A. ocahui*, *A. deserti* and *A. victoriae-reginae* in interesting groupings of pots.

THE BAD: The stout terminal spines and leaf margin teeth on some species can hurt you. Ken Compton volunteers at the DBG on Fridays helping Chad with agaves. Ken's wife Joan jokes that if he isn't bleeding when he gets home, she thinks he wasn't working! The pamphlet “Desert Accent Plants,” available in the DBG gift shop, actually ranks each agave species' threat level: not offensive (*A. bracteosa*, *A. vilminoriniana*), injurious (*A. utahensis*), or dangerous (*A. americana*). SOLUTION: Stick with one of the inoffensive softer-leaved agaves for those high traffic areas and plant the armored ones away from areas where children play or people walk. Wear eye protection and gloves when working with them. I often use welding gloves to protect my forearms as well as my hands. If you have to move a larger agave, it is safest to first nip off the tips of the terminal spines.

Just when they group up and look perfect in that spot, they send up a flowering stalk and die. The octopus agave (*A. vilmoriniana*) may hold the record for shortest agave life span; sometimes it reproduces and dies within five years (but almost redeems itself by providing you with hundreds of bulbils if you choose to continue to have short-term, serial relationships with individuals of this species). SOLUTION: Select some of the longer-lived varieties such as *Agave victoriae-reginae*, *A. ocahui*, *A. pelona*, and *A. macroacantha* (*A. utahensis* may hold the record at almost 60 years) and be sure to save a few pups or bulbils for replacement purposes if you have a variety that produces them. CACSS member Jim Elliot points out that witnessing the “big bang” of agave flower stalk production should be considered a highlight, rather than a disappointment, of growing agaves. Enjoy the show; it's really incredible to watch!

Some agave species seem to multiply faster than rabbits in a botanical garden (often in difficult to extract areas) and threaten to overtake your landscape. *Agave americana* and *A. lophantha* are among the worse offenders; others to think twice about are *A.*

lechuguilla, *A. schottii*, *A. murpheyi*, *A. funkiana* and *A. angustifolia* unless you are looking for a good security barrier planting. SOLUTION: Plant agaves that don't produce pups much or at all. Chad compiled this helpful list of more or less solitary agaves for DBG Desert Landscaper School students (cleverly entitled "pup-ulation control" by DLS coordinator Rebecca Senior): *A. bovicornuta*, *A. colorata*, *A. gemniflora*, *A. harvardiana*, *A. multiflifera*, *A. ocahui*, *A. pelona*, *A. ovatifolia*, *A. schidigera* and *A. vilmoriniana*. You will thank them.

THE UGLY: Two words—agave snout-weevils. We often get calls on the DBG plant hotline in late summer asking why big agaves in front yards have suddenly collapsed into a rotting, smelly mess with just the center point sticking up. Unfortunately, they had been infested with weevils in the spring and at this point they cannot be saved. CHEMICAL SOLUTION: Chad treats his susceptible larger agaves in early April and again in late May with the systemic insecticide Imidacloprid (trade names Marathon and Merit, usually available at Baker's and Berridge nurseries). He prefers Marathon because it dissolves better. He recommends raking and watering in the granules around the base of the agaves where the roots can absorb the chemical and incorporate it into the plant. Some horticulturalists treat all susceptible agaves while others caution against treating agaves about to bloom to prevent pollinators from being exposed to the systemic insecticide. You can usually tell when an agave is about to send up its central bud. NON-CHEMICAL SOLUTION: Avoid the wide-leafed agaves, such as *A. americana* (AKA: weevil magnet) and *A. weberi*. Stick with the smaller, narrow-leaved species like those in the sub-genera *Littaea* such as *A. bracteosa*, *A. schidigera*, *A. victoriae-reginae*, *A. gemniflora*, *A. ocahui*, *A. pelona* and *A. multiflifera*; they are much less prone to weevil damage. It may also be somewhat of a consolation knowing that weevils often infest mature agaves that are likely going to bloom and die soon anyhow.

But don't let those darn weevils scare you off. There are non-chemical options if you pick the right agaves and the chemical options should be safe if you apply them appropriately. If you don't have any agaves, give them a try. They add eye-catching scriptural exclamation points everywhere you place them in your landscape. For more information on agaves, see the book, Agaves, Yuccas and Related Plants, by Mary and Gary Irish available in the DBG library and gift shop. Thanks to Jim Elliot of Arizona Cactus Sales (they have a good selection of agaves, too), Chad Davis, and Rebecca Senor for helping me with this article.