

# The Agave Succulent

The agave is a succulent plant of a large botanical genus of the same name, belonging to the family Agavaceae.

## Description

The plants have a large rosette of thick fleshy leaves, each ending generally in a sharp point and with a spiny margin; the stout stem is usually short, the leaves apparently springing from the root. Along with plants from the related genus *Yucca*, various *Agave* species are popular ornamental plants.

Each rosette is monocarpic (blooms once and then dies) and grows slowly to flower only once. During flowering a tall stem or "mast" grows from the center of the leaf rosette and bears a large number of shortly tubular flowers. After development of fruit the original plant dies, but suckers are frequently produced from the base of the stem which become new plants.

It is a common misconception that Agaves are cacti. Agaves are closely related to the lily and amaryllis families, and are not related to cacti.

Agave species are used as food plants by the larvae of some butterflies and moths and flowers and seed pods are enjoyed by bats.

The blue agave, found in America, is cultivated to produce the alcoholic drink, Tequila.

The juice from many species of agave can cause acute contact dermatitis. It will produce reddening and blistering lasting one to two weeks. Episodes of itching may recur up to a year thereafter, even though there is no longer a visible rash. Irritation is, in part, caused by calcium oxalate raphides. Dried parts of the plants can be handled with bare hands with little or no effect. If the skin is pierced deeply enough, by the needle-like ends of the leaf from a vigorously growing plant, this can also cause blood vessels in the surrounding area to erupt and a area some 6-7cm across appear to be bruised. This may last up to two to three weeks.

Spanish and Portuguese explorers probably brought agave plants back to Europe with them, but the plants became popular in Europe during the 19th century when many types were imported by collectors. Some have been continuously propagated by offset since then, and do not consistently resemble any species known in the wild, although this may simply be due to the differences in growing conditions in Europe.

In Andalusia the dried flower stalk and seed pods are often cut down and decorated at Christmas time.

