

Some agave plants grow well in our area



Carol Dalu
Master Gardener

Question: In recent travels to the southwest I came across an interesting plant called agave. I would like to know more about this plant and if it will grow in our area.

AnsWER: The interesting, eye-catching agave plant is native to the southern United States, Mexico, the Caribbean and northern South America. It is valued for its very striking appearance, how easy it is to grow and for being drought tolerant.

Although it looks very much like a cactus, it is actually a perennial succulent. Agave is in the Agavaceae family of evergreen succulents, which also includes dracaenas, yuccas and ponytail palms. Commonly named the 'Century Plant' because it was thought they need about a century to bloom, however, many will bloom after 10 to 15 years. And although they are often found in the gardens in drier Mediterranean climates, there are varieties that will grow nicely in the Pacific Northwest region.

Agave is a genus of several hundred species, so there should be one to meet the needs of any garden – from very large specimens that grow to 20 feet in diameter, to rather small dish-sized varieties perfect for small pots.

Some have stiff, upright leaves with sharp spines along the edges and others are soft with no spines, but most all have leaves that end in a sharp point. They come in colors ranging from green, blue-green to gray-green, some are variegated with yellow or white striped leaves, and others have leaves with eye-catching red or white tips.

Agave plants are typically long-lived plants grown mainly for their



PIXABAY PHOTOS

Agave victoriae-reginea (Queen Victoria Century Plant) is a smaller variety of agave plant that is well-suited to a Pacific Northwest climate. However, it may need protection on the coldest days.



Agave parryi's (Artichoke Agave) silvery-blue to silvery-green leaves have dark spines. The variety is a good choice to grow in the Pacific Northwest.

dramatic foliage, not their flowers. Agave is monocarpic, meaning they bloom one time when fully mature, which can take anywhere from 5 to 40 years, and then die. The blooms are quite spectacular, as the giant

flowering spike can reach upwards of 15 feet or more. Generally, by the time they bloom, they will have produced small pup plants around the base or will have produced seeds or plantlets on the flower stalk, which can then be

transplanted to replace the parent plant once it dies.

Agave plants are fairly easy to grow; they seem to thrive on neglect. For those looking for drought-resistant, fire-resistant, low-water plants, agave

is a great option. They prefer rocky or sandy soil but will tolerate any well-draining soil, and they are not particular about the soil pH. Agave plants need a sunny location and depending on the full size at maturity, they need space to spread out. Before planting, confirm the location you have chosen will be appropriate for the plant at full size, as many reach 4 to 6 or even 10 feet in diameter.

When first establishing plants they will need water every 4-5 days for about a month. Then taper off to once a week, then every other week depending on the weather. Once established, let the soil dry out before watering. If you do not have the space for a large plant, there are smaller varieties that do well in pots and can be planted in the standard cactus potting mix. Consider using an unglazed pot, as it will allow better

evaporation of excess moisture. For agave plants sensitive to cold, planting in pots offers the flexibility of bringing them indoors during the winter months. As with many plants, fall and spring are good times for planting agave.

Although most prefer drier Mediterranean climates, there are quite a few that are cold hardy and will grow in the Pacific Northwest. Here is just a sampling:

■ **Agave havardiana** (Harvard Agave), silver-gray leaves

■ **Agave Montana** (Mountain Agave), apple-green leaves with red teeth

■ **Agave ovatifolia** (Whale's Tongue Agave), gray to powdery blue leaves lined with small teeth

■ **Agave parryi** (Artichoke Agave), silvery-blue to silvery-green leaves with dark spines

■ **Agave victoriae-reginea** (Queen Victoria Century Plant), dark green leaves with white margins and one of the smaller varieties; may need protection on the coldest days

When considering an agave plant, choose one that will make a nice focal point in the garden, paying attention to the size it will achieve at maturity. Also, remember most have sharp thorns or prickly edges, which is something to keep in mind if there are children or pets in the home; placing them away from walkways and patio areas is helpful.

Do you have a gardening question? Email, call, or visit the Douglas County Master Gardener Plant Clinic at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, 541-672-4461, or 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg.