

July 7, 2021

Garden Patch

## **Agaves Boast Blooms!**

Agaves have a rugged reputation. These perennials thrive when planted in little more than gravel, expect minimal moisture and hold their upright position despite extreme heat, drought or snow. This winter, however, zero degree temperatures took a heavy toll.

Succulents such as cacti and agave were hard hit since they store a lot of water in their foliage. When that water froze, it expanded causing tissue damage in the same way that house pipes freeze and break. Afterwards, agave plants looked scarred, misshapen and rotten. Often the leaves were destroyed. Sometimes the central plants showed promise. Genetics determined which agaves fared best, as did their growing conditions.



Ironically, it is the plants' water holding capability that enables agaves to endure extreme heat and drought. Their form also plays a life-saving role. Agaves, which are trunkless and unbranched, have leaves that are arranged in a spiral along a small stem. This rosette shape funnels water to the root zone. During drought, the stem shrinks, creating a tiny space for moisture to easily reach roots.

Dead leaves should be removed. Use gloves to avoid pricks and tug gently on the leaves. If they are pliable (fold in your hand), they will easily pull away from the plant's base. You may leave the central plant alone. It may recover and regrow from the base. However, it could take a few years for the plant to look as it should.

Some area gardeners received a rather big surprise this spring. Upon inspection, their agaves had grown giant asparagus-looking stalks and sprouted blooms! These 15-30 ft. tall flower spikes lured pollinators, such as bats, hummingbirds, moths and bees.

Although it's possible that these sturdy plants reacted to the cold, wet winter, it's also likely that it was their "time" to bloom. Some agave varieties bloom multiple times in a lifetime. However, agaves commonly referred to as 'century plants' bloom once. The belief that agaves

bloom once every hundred years is false. Most century plants bloom at 10-20 years old. As they approach the end of their lifespan, they store sugar and starch in their central core. These stored resources provide energy for the fast-growing flower stalk.

Producing flower stalks of the “jack-and-the-beanstalk” variety takes a harsh toll on century plants. After they bloom, they die. However, most agaves propagate by rhizomes, suckers and offsets, also called pups or daughter plants, which develop around the original plant. Many plant owners never suspect that the parent plant has died. The smaller plants quickly grow, replacing the parent in the landscape!

Agaves grow best in full sun and planted in gritty, well-drained soil without irrigation. Fertilizing is not necessary. And they enjoy heat far better than cold!

**For answers to your horticulture questions, please call the Texas AgriLife Extension, Hood County at 817-579-3280 or go online to visit [lakegranburymastergardeners.org](http://lakegranburymastergardeners.org).**

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