A New Look with Century Plants  

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Plants that are underused in our Florida landscapes are agave and yucca. These plants normally thrive in harsh climates with lots of hot, sunny dry weather. They prefer poor sandy soils and require little or no fertilizer. Many species are even able to withstand our North Florida cold snaps without suffering any damage. All of these characteristics translate to low maintenance plants that can enhance our ‘water restricted’ residential landscapes.

Agave plants are succulents that have a rosette of long, upward growing spear-shaped leaves. Some species have boldly stiff and upright leaves with formidable spines or barbs. Others have leaves that curve gracefully outward despite their tough, leathery exterior. Sizes range from giant 12 foot plants down to diminutive 6 inch ground covers. But they all offer bold shape and texture contrasts with other plants.

Century Plant is a common name used to reference quite a few of the 200 plus agave species which vary widely in color and size. This causes a great deal of confusion. Because of the common name, many people assume that these plants live to be one hundred years old before finally flowering and dying.

It actually takes the century plant anywhere from 8 to 30 years to mature and flower. The late spring flowers are held high above the plant on tall stems. Most plants will die after flowering but a few species will flower several times during their life. Before it dies, small plants called ‘pups’ form around the base. These pups can be separated from the parent plant and then be transplanted.

Although agaves are easy to grow, there are a few necessary growing requirements. Six or more hours of direct sun are needed. Sandy soils are great, but they must be well drained or root rot is likely. This is especially important in North Florida where temperatures are cooler in the winter months. If soils are heavy or usually have high moisture content, plant agaves on a mound of soil or in a container.

It is easy to understand why so many people enjoy collecting many different agave species. The color and size variations are so wide ranged and interesting. There are even two species, false sisal and wild century plant, that are native to Florida. A great article to get you started with agaves can be found at the UF site http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ep419. This article contains color photos and descriptions of 50 different agaves.

Our University of Florida Master Gardeners can help answer your gardening questions. Call them at 752-5384 on Tues and Thursday mornings. (Published 9-9-12)

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