Featured Plant

Common Name: Parry's agave or century plant
Scientific Name: *Agave parryi*

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Parry's agave (*Agave parryi*) is a member of the *Agavaceae* (Century plant) family and is native to the southwestern United States (Arizona, New Mexico) and northern Mexico. The genus Agave is from the Greek word agavos for admirable, noble, splendid. This refers to the noble appearance of the century plant.

Agave parryi is a succulent, rosette perennial growing to approximately 3 feet in height and a spread of about 4 feet in diameter. The leaves are grey-green and have a sharp spine at the tip. The flower stalk grows to approximately 15-20 feet in height. The flowers are white to cream-colored, perfect (have both male and female organs) and are primarily pollinated by a variety of bats, hummingbirds and insects searching for nectar. *Agave parryi* plants bloom only once in their life cycle. The plant is also called "century plant" because of this "once a century" bloom occurrence. In truth, the plant lives an average of 20-25 years.

Culturally, this plant has a variety of medicinal, edible and practical uses by native people. The leaves, stem, sap and seeds are all documented as edible. The heart of the plant can be eaten when baked. The young flower stalk, seeds, and tender young leaves are all edible when prepared, generally by roasting. Medicinal uses are listed as an antiseptic, laxative and diuretic. Practical uses include needles, fiber, paper, soap and thatching. *Agave parryi* is also commonly known as a source for the production of mescal or tequila.

From a horticultural perspective, *Agave parryi* can be propagated from seed in well-drained soil and placed in a location that receives ample sunlight and consistent warm temperatures (20°C/68°F). Parent plants also produce offsets or "pups" that can be carefully harvested and propagated to create a new plant. When transplanting into a landscape setting, these plants will grow well in full sun and dry, well-drained soil. Be careful not to transplant into poorly drained soils as this will promote root rot. This plant has a slow growth rate, requires infrequent watering and is an appropriate candidate as an accent plant in xeriscape settings.

URL References:
http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~plants-c/bio414/species%20pages/Agave%20parryi.htm
http://www.pfaf.org/user/Plant.aspx?LatinName=Agave+parryi

Featured Bird

Common Name: Blue Grosbeak
Scientific Name: *Passerina caerulea*

Dan L. Fischer

Dan L. Fischer - Author of *Early Southwest Ornithologists, 1738-1900*, University of Arizona Press

An opportunity to observe a pair of Blue Grosbeak is relatively uncommon except during the nesting season. They may be in the vicinity together, but the male, attired in dark blue spring plumage with cinnamon wing-bars, appears quite conspicuous by comparison to the often overlooked, rather dull brown female. Their sexual dimorphism is sharply pronounced by the contrasting blue of the male, and since there is no pigment for that color in most birds, it is revealed to us by light filtered through rather thin layers or a series of surface feathers. The feather structure contains fine suspended cells thought to produce the blue reflected light. Following a fall molt of brown they forego a spring molt unlike most birds. Then, in winter, their plumage transforms through feather wear into a vibrant blue.

Each year, toward the middle of May, the Blue Grosbeak is one of the last birds to return from Mexico to Arizona. Their presence is generally first noticed by their distinctive call note that sounds similar to a metallic *pik* or *clink*. Remaining scarce and shy, their activity becomes more apparent as the monsoon rains begin. Then, solitary males suddenly appear and begin singing a rich strain of clear melodious phrases from a topmost branch among willow, cottonwood or mesquite thickets.

Nesting follows quickly and continues into early September. Both parents participate in nest building and feeding the young. Usually four, slightly glossy, pale blue eggs are laid in a cup nest and are incubated for about twelve days. The young fledge in about ten days. Their diet at this time is largely dependent on the resources that result from the summer storms. A successful second brood is no doubt dependent on these vital rains. Blue Grosbeak are sometimes hosts to the unconventional way of brood parasitism by the Brown-headed Cowbird where the female lays her eggs in the nest, leaving her chicks to be fostered.

Blue Grosbeak occur in the more southern regions of the United States and south into Mexico to Costa Rica. Their distribution is fairly widespread across Arizona in favorable riparian habitats with greater densities appearing in the southeastern portions of the state.

It is little wonder then, that the discovery of the Blue Grosbeak was first brought about by Mark Catesby (1682-1749), an Englishman, who during the latter part of the eighteenth century, contributed the best and most detailed book during that period on the natural history of the New World. He explored the east coast of colonial America and the Bahama Islands. After discovering the bird in Carolina, he created with great artistic ability a drawing calling it "The blew Gross-bec" and placed it among branches of a sweet bay or swamp magnolia. Carolus Linnaeus, after refining bird nomenclature in 1758, used Catesby's plate and description when he applied its species Latin term *caerulea* meaning "blue." The mandible size reference of the Grossbeak is from the French terms *gros*, "large" and *bec*, "beak." The generic name of *Passerina* is of Latin origin meaning "sparrow-like."