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Agave

Asparagaceae

[*Agavaceae*]

Agave is derived from Greek *agauos* (admirable) with reference to the stature and general appearance of the flowers.

Although called Aloe agaves are not members of the *Aloe* family and have different properties.

The name Century plant arises out of the mistaken belief that the plant only flowers after 100 years. It actually flowers after 8-10 years and/or when the temperature is high enough and it receives the appropriate stimulation – and then the plant dies.

Warning – plant juice can cause skin rashes, burning and itching, as also can the dry fibres.

In tropical countries some varieties of the plant, particularly century plant (*Agave americana*), are cultivated as a cheap and effective cattle fence and in veterinary medicine as a purgative. The powdered leaf of others provides a snuff, and the root and leaves (particularly in Jamaica) have been used as a source of soap for washing clothes.

Today Mexican henequen (*Agave fourcroydes*) and sisal (*Agave sisalana*), together with sisal from Brazil and east Africa, account for about one half of the world's supply of hard plant fibre for rope and twine. But this crop is now threatened by the use of manmade fibres.

After the 2nd World War the Department of Agriculture in the United States examined the *Agave* genus to assess the species' yield of steroidal sapogenin from which cortisone could be synthesized for medicinal use. Although the results were promising the yams (the *Dioscorea* family) proved to be more fruitful.