

Agave americana

[Synonyms : *Agave altissima*, *Agave atrovirens*, *Agave complicata*, *Agave felina*, *Agave fourcroyoides*, *Agave gracilispina*, *Agave melliflua*, *Agave rasconensis*, *Agave subzonata*, *Agave vera-cruz*, *Agave zonata*]

CENTURY PLANT is an evergreen succulent perennial. Native to Middle America (particularly eastern Mexico) it has yellowish-green flowers.

It is also known as *Abècèdaire* (French), *Agave* (English, German, Swedish), *Agáve americká* (Czech, Slovak), *Agave d’Amerique* (French), *Agavo amerika* (Esperanto), *Alagai* (Tamil), *Almindelig Agave* (Danish), *Aloe*, *American agave*, *American aloe*, *American century*, *Amerikanische Agave* (German), *Athánatos* (Greek), *Common century plant*, *Flowering aloe*, *Hundraaorig Aloe* (Swedish), *Jättiagaave* (Finnish), *Jungli anaras* (Bengali), *Kantala* (Hindi, Sanskrit), *Ketki* (Gujarati), *Kittanara* (Telugu), *Maguey*, *Mexican soap plant*, *Piteira* (Portuguese), *Pulque*, and *Spiked aloe*, and *Wiliyatikaitalu* (Punjabi).

The rosette of leaves dies with the flower and suckers are usually left at the base from which a new rosette can form.

Greenish-tinged bittersweet-tasting sap fills the centre of mature young plants (at least 6-8 years old). This can be tapped from the fleshy leaf bases over a period of two or more months. The plant is said to be able to give about four pints of sap a week and yield in all as much as 220 gallons.

Century plant is similar in appearance to species in the *Aloe* genus which are of a different family and, unlike century plant, flower for most of every year.

Americana means ‘of or from America (North or South)’.

Century plant is native to the area inhabited by the Mayas, whose civilization began around 2000 BC, but it had been harvested by local inhabitants at least 4-5,000 years earlier. The general Mayan populous were not allowed to wear the fine cotton garments (*Gossypium*) reserved for their ruling classes. Instead they made material from the fibres they extracted from the century plant’s tough leaves – material which would be considered too rough for clothing today,. This cloth, made from several of the agave species including ones used in modern times almost exclusively for rope, was still being used by the then inhabitants of Middle America when Europeans landed there at the end of the 15th Century. Today in the Azores the fibres are used to produce material for drawnthreadwork.

Different varieties of the century plant were introduced to southern Europe from the Americas in the 16th Century but some authorities believe that this was the first species to arrive at the hands of the Spanish. On the Mediterranean island of Cyprus century plant is now a familiar sight in Turkish cemeteries.

For Mexicans the century plant is the Tree of Life and Abundance, no doubt because of the many uses to which it can be put. Local North American Indian tribes, ranging from the Oklahoma area down to Mexico, have looked to the plant for food. For the Tohono O’Odham, Ute, Comanche, Paiute, Apache, Yuma, Mohave and Pima tribes it was a staple food prepared in various ways. The fruit heads and leaves were roasted and sun-dried, the tubers were baked in a pit, the crown leaves were cooked as a green vegetable

in Winter, the flower stalks (that can weigh several pounds and were picked in the Summer before the flowers bloomed) were roasted and also eaten as a vegetable from the Spring-time, and the juice (sap) was boiled to make a syrup. Most of the tribes stored some of the prepared food for later use and the Tohono O'Odham Indians, particularly, kept some as emergency rations. (In India the stems have also provided famine food.) Some of the Apache Indians fermented baked and crushed roots to make liquor. But century plant's value was not limited to culinary essentials. The Tohono O'Odham tribe notably developed its uses in other directions as well. They made combs, brushes and carrying nets with the fibre, and used split leaves for weaving house frames. A passing comment made by one authority illustrates the toughness of the dried flower stem – apparently it can make an effective razor strop. Beyond this, however, the Tohono O'Odham treated the plant as a cash crop and the plant itself, together with prepared delicacies, was bartered with other tribes. Today the distilled/fermented sap is used in Latin American drinks including one of the Mexican national drinks *pulque*, and mescal and tequila. The sap is also used for making sugar, and vinegar. Medicinally, in India the leaf juice has been used as a laxative and in the treatment of fluid retention.