

*Yucca baccata*

[Synonyms : *Yucca arizonica*, *Yucca baccata* var. *vespertina*, *Yucca brevifolia*, *Yucca circinata*, *Yucca confinis*, *Yucca treleasei*, *Yucca vespertina*]

**BROAD-LEAVED YUCCA** is an evergreen succulent shrub. Native to south-western North America it has white flowers.

It is also known as Amole, Banana yucca, Blue yucca, Datil, Fleshy-fruited yucca, *Hokiapa* (Zuni North American Indian), *Jukka* (Finnish), *Palmililja* (Swedish), Spanish bayonet, Spanish dagger, and Wild date.

Its flowers are pollinated by moths and the fruit pods can often be swarming with that moth's larvae.

*Baccata* is derived from Latin *baca* (berry) meaning 'berry-like or pulpy and juicy'.

Records of its importance to the North American Zuni Indians mention that the leaves not only formed part of their ritual dress but that the leaf fibre was also used for making cords used during those rituals, and the central stalk was chosen for ritual whipping too. Long before the Spaniards introduced sheep ie. wool, from across the Atlantic the Zuni tribe used the leaf fibre to weave fabrics – as did the Apache Indians. Like some of the Tohono O'Odham the Zuni also wove the leaves into matting, and the Hopi, Zuni, some of the Navajo, the Isleta and some of the Tohono O'Odham tribes also used them for basketry. (Apache Indians made baskets with the roots as well as the leaves.) Cord, rope and string were made with stem and leaf fibre by many Indian tribes including the Hualapai, some of the Tohono O'Odham, the Apache, Navajo, some of the Keresan, the Zuni, Tewa, Havasupai and Isleta Indians. Leaf fibre also offered material for several tribes including the Yavapai, some of the Tohono O'Odham, the Hualapai and some of the Navajo to make small brushes (for cleaning containers say or brushing hair or painting). It was also used by the Tewa Indians for making their fishing nets. Some of the Navajo tribe tossed balls of leaves in the air for archery practice – and Havasupai Indians used the leaves to make hoops for one of their traditional games. Stout leaves proved to be ideal drumsticks for the Navajo tribe, and some of this tribe also used the leaf juice in some dyeing processes. Stems were used to make Hualapai shoes, and the Havasupai Indians used the stout brown spines at the leaf ends as sewing needles. As if this was not enough the dried leaves provided an ingredient in a solution used to waterproof Havasupai baskets.

The roots, although said to be a poor alternative to soap weed (*Yucca glauca*) which apparently produces more lather, have been used for washing clothing (and themselves) by the Hopi, Havasupai, Tewa, Zuni, Navajo, Apache and Hualapai tribes. It would seem from authorities' reports that some of the Keresan Indians preferred to rely on soap made by the crushed leaves in water – and the Yavapai tribe used the whole plant. Apart from the Yavapai and some of the Tohono O'Odham Indians who applied the plant (in water) to their hair as a shampoo, the Apache, Tewa, Keresan and Navajo Indians tribes employed the root for hair-washing.

It is hardly surprising that broad-leaved yucca was not only appreciated as a cash crop by some Indian tribes (not least some of the Tohono O'Odham) but that it also played a role in the ceremonial ritual of quite a few North American tribes as well as the Zuni. Apart from

the latter already referred to, both the leaves and stems played a role in some of the Keresan ceremonies – and the root featured in Navajo and Tewa rituals.

The fruit were eaten fresh, roasted, boiled or baked in pies by the Hualapai (for whom the ground fruit were a staple food), the Isleta, some of the Tohono O’Odham, the Hopi, some of the Keresan, the Zuni, Navajo, Yavapai and Tewa Indian tribes. Many North American Indian tribes including the Hopi, Walapai, Apache, some of the Keresan, Isleta, Hualapai, Havasupai and Navajo tribes dried the fruit (by varying methods) and stored them for Winter food. Dried fruit also formed part of the standard rations received by Navajo warriors in times of conflict.

For the Zuni the fruit were a luxury not only enjoyed boiled as a food but also prepared as a conserve. Preparation of this conserve involved all members of the tribe in one way or another, not least those who chewed the fruit ready for the next process which involved leaving it to stand (guarded) for varying periods of time. The eventual, solidified mass was stored in the fabric of their dwellings and small pieces were broken off as required – either to eat directly or to mix with water for a syrup. This syrup was particularly sought after and was not only drunk undiluted but also added (as a sweetener) to other beverages – and to boiled green peaches (*Prunus persica*). Several other tribes (such as the Navajo, the Apache and some of the Keresan) made sauces with the fruit, some of the Keresan Indians made a paste from the dried fruit, the Navajo tribe used the fruit for making preserves, and the Hopi and Zuni Indians enjoyed them as jam. Navajo Indians and some of the Tohono O’Odham Indians ground, dried ripe fruit and ate them as a porridge-like mush.

The fruit (fermented) were an ingredient in an alcoholic drink prepared by Hualapai Indians – while the dried fruit, in water, gave the Yavapai, some of the Keresan and Tohono O’Odham Indian tribes and the Walapai Indians a non-alcoholic beverage. Havasupai Indians also enjoyed a beverage made from the plant, and Apache Indians drank the fruit juice.

Some of the Tohono O’Odham tribe chewed the dried plant like sweets and they also enjoyed the dried seeds. Before the shrub flowered the Yavapai tribe ate the roasted flower stems and before the Summer rains arrived Apache Indians ate the flowers as a vegetable (later in the season they became bitter-tasting). The Apache added young leaves to soups and meat dishes as a flavouring. For some of the Keresan however the plant had yet another advantage as its young crowns, roasted, provided the tribe with starvation or emergency rations.

The shrub was a source of medicine for a few North American Indian tribes. Apart from prescribing it for stomach upsets the Navajo Indians also used it to cause vomiting. It was used by the Tewa and some of the Navajo during childbirth, and for some of the Tohono O’Odham Indian tribe it offered a purgative.

Today the fruit are used to make pies and confectionery.

Deer enjoy the fruit.