

Agaves can be found without sharp spines



Agave Victoria-reginae

Many agaves have very sharp spines. There is, however, no shortage of friendlier species, possessing softer, flexible tips, and one of these is the lovely California native *Agave shawii*. This upright, rosette-forming succulent, found in Baja, California, suckers from the base to form large solid stands. Agaves make great additions to dry garden plots and do equally well in Mediterranean gardens, where our dry, sunny summers are to their liking. The group of smaller agaves makes wonderful design accents and there is one to fit nearly every design scheme imaginable. *A. americana* 'Marginata' offers a fountain-shaped rosette of undulating leaves featuring golden stripes bordered in olive green.

For those blue lovers, *A. attenuata* is one of the most recognizable of all agaves, with its large, smooth, steel blue leaves. This frost-tender, 5-foot-tall foxtail agave is also the only species to form a trunk. *Agave vilmoriniana*, known as octopus agave because its narrow green leaves twist back toward the ground like outreaching tentacles, is popular because of its lack of spines and quickly flowering nature.

The agaves mentioned are spineless, but there are some beautiful species that are proud to show off their thorns. These mostly 2-foot-tall varieties are ideal for containers, where their beauty can be more safely displayed. These include the Butterfly agave (*A. potatorum*), whose symmetrical rosettes feature broad, blue-gray reflexed leaves that are tipped with chestnut brown spines. Parry's agave (*A. parryi*) is an excellent choice for colder climates and is a standout with its bluish-green rosettes that are tipped with nearly black spines. The suitably deadly-looking *A. Victoriae-reginae* is considered to be one of the most beautiful agaves, with its dramatic white markings seeming like something added from a painter's palette.

Mezcal is a distilled alcoholic beverage made from the maguey plant (*Agave americana*), native to Mexico. Today, mezcal is still made from the heart of this plant, called the piña, in some places much the same way it was 200 years ago.

Cultivation

Grow in sharply drained soil in full sun or light shade. *A. shawii* is hardy to 25 degrees, but if you are buying other species, check on their frost hardiness. Agaves can handle a variety of soils, from fertile to poor, as long as excellent drainage is provided. Propagate by offsets or plantlets.

Excerpts from an article by Erle Nickel in the **San Francisco Chronicle**