Nothing draws more attention in a neighborhood than a flowering century plant. With its soaring flower stalk and menacing looking foliage, these plants are show stoppers. The century plant is a type of succulent in the Agave genus. Gary Knox, Professor at the University of Florida, tells us more about this interesting group of plants.

Many people rightly think of agave and yucca as tough plants associated with extreme environments like deserts and dunes. What they may not realize is that agave and yucca also adapt well to home and commercial landscapes where they thrive in the sometimes harsh conditions associated with urban living.

Agave and yucca are found in native environments that typically are hot, sunny, dry, windy, or scrubby with little water and poor soil. In cultivation, this adaptability translates into low maintenance since typically they need little or no irrigation, fertilizer, pruning or spraying.

Above and beyond their toughness, agave and yucca capture the imagination of many people because of their dramatic architectural forms and unusual shapes. In addition, these plants boast intriguing defensive "weaponry": stiff, hard or leathery leaves, often armed with wicked barbs, teeth or spines. Part of the fascination with these plants may lie in this armor, because there is almost a sense of danger when growing these plants! Agave tends to have more armor than yucca. Each agave plant consists of a rosette of long, stiff, spear-shaped, fleshy leaves often armed with teeth and tipped with a long terminal spine.
*Agave* species is familiar to most people thanks to the commonly grown century plant, *Agave americana*. But with more than 200 additional species of *Agave*, many people don't realize the diversity of sizes, shapes and colors that are available. *Agave* varies in size from a few inches to more than 8 feet tall and wide. Leaf color ranges from deep green to grass green to blue green to grey, and leaves may be striped or mottled with white, cream, yellow and chartreuse.

Flowering also is dramatic and attractive though it sometimes takes years before doing so. When finally flowering, however, agave develops branched spikes of yellow, rose or white tubular flowers on incredibly tall stems 6 to 40 feet above the plant. After flowering, the parent plant typically dies, although usually a number of small plants form around the base of the parent plant. The small plants are technically called "offsets" but have the more imaginative common name of "pups". These may be separated from the parent plant for propagation.

*Yucca* is similar to *agave* but often forms trunks and typically has more numerous, thinner, leathery leaves with a smaller terminal spine. *Yucca* leaves range in color from deep green to pale blue, and leaves may be striped in shades of white, cream, yellow and chartreuse. When in flower, yucca produces large, upright panicles of white, bell-shaped flowers. Unlike the tall flower stems of *agave*, yucca flower panicles are held within or just above the foliage. There are more than 20 species of *Yucca* of which 4 can be considered native to Florida.

Theresa Friday is the Environmental Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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