

CHAPARRAL YUCCA

Yucca whipplei Torr.

Plant Symbol = YUWH

Contributed By: USDA NRCS National Plant Data Center & UC Davis Arboretum



Alfred Brousseau
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Alternate Names

Hesperoyucca whipplei (Torr.) Baker; our lord's candle, Whipple's yucca

Uses

Ethnobotanic: The apical meristem, young flower stalks, flowers, and tender immature pods were eaten

by many tribes in southern California including the Tubatulabal, Cahuilla, Luiseno, Diegueno, Kawaiisu, and Western Shoshone and are still gathered today.

According to the Kawaiisu, traditionally in the early spring, the apical meristem or "heart" was removed with the aid of an oak or a juniper shaft. It was then roasted in a pit for a lengthy period. While green and tender the flower stalk that grows out of the apical meristem was cut or broken off by hand. These stalks were cut into sections and roasted in fire or in ashes and coals. It is reputed to have a sweet taste. The flowers are edible and can be boiled and eaten. The Diegueno tribe harvested the flowers before they opened and boiled them twice to remove the bitterness before eating.

Chaparral yucca was also an important fiber plant. The Diegueno and Cahuilla used the fibers for sandals while the Chumash and the Gabrielino used it for fishing line. Whole or split yucca leaves were also utilized for rough tying of bundles of firewood, house frames, and for basketry. To retrieve and prepare the fibers, the leaves were immersed in water until the epidermal sheath and the connecting round tissue rotted away. The leaves may also have been pounded with a wooden mallet to facilitate the process. The fibers are then buried in mud to whiten them, washed and combed.

Wildlife: The seeds and fruits are eaten by the antelope ground squirrel and hummingbirds consume the nectar.

Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status and wetland indicator values.

Description

General: Agave Family (Agavaceae). This shrub is simple and acaulescent with no evident trunk. The leaves are slender, stiff and gray-green. They are 3-8 dm long and radiate from a central base and have needle-like tips. The plant has a single flower stalk, which is covered with fragrant, creamy white flowers. Night-flying moths pollinate the flowers. The fruit is a capsule containing numerous black seeds. After fruiting the plant dies. Some plants reproduce vegetatively through offsets.

Distribution

For current distribution, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Web site. This plant is found in chaparral, coastal sage scrub, creosote bush scrub and the desert at elevations below 2500 m. It grows in southern California, northwestern Arizona, and Baja, California.

Establishment

Seeds: Plant the seeds in the fall in deep, one-gallon pots in well-drained soil. Lay the seeds on top of the soil and sprinkle soil over the seeds until they are covered. Then cover the soil with one quarter-inch of gravel. Keep the pots damp through the first year. The plants need sharp drainage and space. Plant the young seedling the following fall outside. This yucca needs full sun, excellent drainage, and is intolerant of frequent summer water. It can endure cold temperatures to about 10 degrees F.

Cuttings: Cut off yucca leaves at the point of origin in the spring. Reduce the length of the leaves to six inches, exposing bare stem tissue. Stick the cuttings in a pot with well-drained soil and water the soil, keeping it slightly moist. Place the pot in partial shade. Plant the seedling outdoors in full sun, in well-drained soil in the fall. Continue to water the plant for three years until it gets established.

Management

Prune back dead or diseased leaves periodically in the autumn.

Cultivars, Improved and Selected Materials (and area of origin)

This species is available from native plant nurseries within its range. Contact your local Natural Resources Conservation Service (formerly Soil Conservation Service) office for more information. Look in the phone book under "United States Government." The Natural Resources Conservation Service will be listed under the subheading "Department of Agriculture."

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