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Desert Delights

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Desert Beauty

Although primarily found in the barren landscape of the West, the diverse yucca plant would be a bold addition to a garden anywhere in the US.

You have to admire a family of plants so bold that they recall both punk rock hairdos and the stylized tree drawings in Dr. Seuss' *Horton Hears a Who!* The yucca, in all its glorious variations, is just such a plant. From the Mojave badlands of Southern California, to the rocky outcrops of the West Texas Chihuahuan Desert, the yucca is an integral part of the western American landscape.

No one can say the yucca has not been useful. As William Dunmire says in his book, *Wild Plants and Native People of the Four Corners*, "Yuccas constitute the single-most important uncultivated group of plants for prehistoric and contemporary Indians living in the Southwest."

Beginning with the Aztecs, yucca fibers were used to make sandals, weave baskets, make rope, belts, bowstrings and fishing nets, just to name a few of the plant's uses. As if those uses were not enough, American Indians also made a shampoo from the roots and cooked with the flowers and fruit.

The yucca also is beautiful. In an age where water is scarce and garden designers clamor for architectural plants, it's a wonder that the yucca hasn't made more of a presence in the world of ornamental horticulture.

In my clients' gardens, plants from the yucca family have earned prominence. There are cold-hardy varieties that do well in sun and shade, and there are species both great and tree-like and small and delicate. All yuccas are evergreen and flowering, and most species are drought tolerant after establishment.

By SCOTT CALHOUN

You make the call

As some of the larger yucca species grow, a thatch of old leaves, sometimes called a skirt, forms around the trunk. The thatch does not hurt the plant and, in cold climates, may help insulate it from cold. However, removing excess thatch does give older yuccas a more architecturally manicured appearance.

The choice is really yours. You have to ask yourself, "How shaggy can this garden look?"

Sampling of yucca species. If you haven't thought about using, growing or designing with yuccas, consider the following species and think again.

Beaked yucca. Featured in gardens as diverse as the Chihuahuan Desert Gardens in El Paso, TX, and Chanticleer near Philadelphia, the beaked yucca (*Yucca rostrata*) (photos, right) earns its keep in the garden.

Notable for its blue foliage and slightly weeping leaves, the beaked yucca reaches heights of up to 10 feet. Its stout trunk

gives it a vertical tree-like emphasis in the garden. The plant's modest 4-foot width makes it a great choice for courtyards or entryways that need a bold plant, but are too small for most trees. As with most yuccas, this selection takes excellent drainage. The beaked yucca sports large, creamy white flower spikes that are very showy. It is cold hardy to -20°.

Pale-leaf yucca. If you like the blue foliage of the beaked yucca but need a shorter plant, the diminutive pale-leaf yucca (*Y. pallida*) (photos, page 23) should fit the bill. Pale-leaf yucca is a trunkless species that can form clumps with up to 30 heads. Its pure-white, lily-like flowers are the perfect complement to its blue leaves. Because this plant is only 1 foot high and wide, it works to excellent effect in hot sidewalk strips mingling with tough native perennials, such as granite zinnia (*Zinnia grandiflora*) and Bacon's firecracker (*Penstemon eatonii*). Pale-leaf yucca is cold hardy to -10°.

Joshua tree. The best known and granddaddy of the yucca family is the Joshua tree (*Y. brevifolia*). The selection was named by Mormon pioneers who



Beaked yucca (*Yucca rostrata*) can grow up to 10 feet high. Large, white flower spikes form on its blue, slightly weeping leaves.



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The banana yucca (*Yucca baccata*) is commonly found in Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah. The shape and taste of this yucca's green fruit are similar to that of a banana. The flowers of the banana yucca also are edible.

thought the tree looked like the nut-strewn arms of the biblical prophet Joshua. This Mojave Desert native grows slowly to heights of up to 30 feet. Although the familiar shaggy profile of the Joshua tree is iconic, its enormous size is an anomaly. If any plant in the yucca family can truly be called a tree, the Joshua tree is it.

Joshua trees planted in the early 1970s near Tucson, AZ, are now maturing in residential neighborhoods, and the result is awe-inspiring. These frontyard trees immediately bring to mind bold landscapes in Dr. Seuss' books. Even though the young Joshua tree you bring home from the nursery will likely be small, don't crowd it. It will mature into a large and strangely dignified plant.

The Joshua tree is hardy to 16° but, like other Mojave Desert yuccas, it is a cool-season grower and dislikes the extreme heat of low deserts. Deep summer waterings will help the plants survive the summers in cities like Phoenix and Yuma, AZ. Las Vegas, on the other hand, is a perfect climate for Joshua trees, and southern Nevada residents would be wise to consider it in lieu of the ubiquitous palm trees that seem to accompany every new home sold there.

Banana yucca. For those who like to browse their own gardens, the banana yucca (*Y. baccata*) (photo, left) is a fine choice. This tasty, low-growing, clumping species is common in the red-rock areas of the four corner states (Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah).

There is probably a yucca for nearly every American gardening climate, and if you have even a passing interest in bold foliage, the yucca family should not be overlooked.



Pale-leaf yucca (*Yucca pallida*) is a diminutive, trunkless plant that grows only 1 foot high and wide. White, flylike flowers complement its blue foliage.

If you are visiting Sedona, AZ, for a hot-rock massage and aura realignment, the yucca outside the door of your resort will most likely be the banana yucca, so named for the shape and sweet taste of its green fruit. The flowers of the banana yucca also are edible; they taste like lettuce and are good in salads.

The banana yucca is a medium-sized plant that looks good against boulders and finely textured perennials. Since it is cold hardy to -20°, it is adaptable to a fairly wide swath of American gardening regions.

Soap weed. For those of you way up north, the soap wood (*Elaeagnus*) is a logical yucca choice. With a native range that extends from north Texas to Canada, soap weed is cold hardy to a baffling -40°. Arizona gardeners don't really believe it gets that cold anywhere. Still, narrow leaves with hairy, filamentous margins and greenish white flowers distinguish the plant.

Soap weed is tolerant of clay soils, drought and deluge. As long as there is some decent drainage, this variety will persist. It is a fine complement to cliff rose (*Ceanothus mexicana*) and rabbit brush (*Chrysothamnus nauseosus*) in Great Basin and Rocky Mountain gardens.

In conclusion, there is probably a



yucca for nearly every American gardening climate, and if you have even a passing interest in bold foliage, the yucca family should not be overlooked.

For a list of suppliers of the plants mentioned in this article, see *Resources* in the Oct. 15 issue.

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