

West Coast Plant Guy

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General Rules for Cultivating Agave

Along the Pacific coast or in areas where there are no heavy frosts, these plants may be cultivated with success outdoors where their beauty is better observed. In cold climates it is advisable to cultivate these plants in pots in order to protect them during the winter in a cold frame, hot house or any dry, fresh room.

Regardless if planted in the ground or in pot culture most agave should be kept rather dry in winter or dormant season and have minimum temperatures above zero in order to obtain good results. Most agave will tolerate low temperatures, some even below zero particularly when dry. For instance; Agave Victoria reginae can take up to -10° C, that's 14° F but it is not a good idea to let any agave freeze.

Cultivation:

Most Agave require well-drained soil and light shade to full sun exposure, but they prefer some afternoon shade during the hottest summer month to avoid being fried by sun.

That said, many of the smaller agave species make excellent pot culture and the majority of agave can be planted outdoor in most of the pacific southwest and southern states.

Basic Care:

To give these marvelous plants vigor and life, water well during spring and summer and let it become almost totally dry between watering.

Temperatures:

Agave will do fine in just about any temperature, they are endemic to the arid lower elevations of the Sierra Madre Oriental Mountains in the state of Coahuila and south of Nuevo Leon in north-eastern Mexico in a desert or semi-desert environment. The plant will do fine with temps in the upper 80's (Fahrenheit) to 100 degrees. On the other side of the scale do not allow your agave to freeze. It will do fine outdoors in temperatures in the upper 40's and greater.

Fertilizer:

Fertilizer is a requirement that is of some debate with growers. We feed our cactus and agave only twice a year in April and once in July with a water soluble potassium-rich fertilizer. Or you can play it safe and use a diluted solution of Miracle Grow or any decent water soluble 20-20-20 plant food mixed at ½ strength.

Soil:

The soil mix for this plant will vary from person to person. Agave thrive best in coarse, sandy substrate. The best mix we found to be a 40% mixture of commercial cactus mix (this has the sand and organics necessary for growth) and 60% small secreted pumice and/or decomposed granite to allow drainage. (We do not use perlite) We use a drainage layer in the bottom of the pot to allow excess water to drain.

Plant Pests:

Prone to mealy bugs and scale. Always inspect any new plant for pests before introducing it to your home or greenhouse. Good ventilation and avoid over-watering will help keep pest to a minimum. If mealy or scale is found just treat with a good water soluble insecticidal soap.

Propagation:

Unfortunately most agave take about 20 years to flower so you have to rely on seed from other sources if you want to propagate from seed. It is easiest to propagate them from the pups or suckers produced at the base of the stems in the spring. If taken from a excellent specimen these pups are sometimes referred to as “super clones” since they will have all the characteristics of the mother plant.

Separate the clones from the mother plant with as much root as possible, even one small root could be enough to insure survival. NOTE; I have had success with no root at all so don't throw away any pups, they were free so take a shot. Plant the pups in evenly moist but well draining soil, continue to mist occasionally and keep in filtered sunlight until they are growing then gradually move them into regular sunlight situations.

Flower: The inflorescence takes the form of a spike, from 2 to 4 meters high, containing many paired flowers of various colors.

Blooming season: Summer. As almost all *Agave* have a long life cycle and set flowers after approximately 10 to 30 years of vegetative growth, and the effort to produce the flowers exhausts the plant which dies within a short time.

Important Notes; OK so what have we learned?

- 1) Most Agave require well-drained soil and light shade to full sun exposure.
- 2) Most agave will tolerate low temperatures, some even below zero particularly when dry.
- 3) **Do not over fertilize;** Feed only twice a year, once in the early spring and once in mid summer.
- 4) **Watch for mealy bugs and scale.** Very common and easily treated with insecticidal soap.