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FORT SELDEN

HISTORIC SITE

AGAVE



The Parry's agave, more commonly referred to as the century plant, is one of approximately 300 species of agave. The leaves of this agave grow in a beautiful grey/blue color but be careful because the leaves are edged with thorns! Along with thorns, its pear shape help protect the plant from predators. One of these predators – mankind – has used it as a source of survival for over 9,000 years!

Identifying the Parry's agave might be an easier task when the plant is in full bloom, which only happens once every 5 to 30 years, hence its nickname as the century plant.

If you come across an agave that is in bloom during late spring and early summer, make sure to look up because the stalk grows from the middle of the agave and it can reach up to 20 feet! The stalk produces branches that will grow many flowers in various shades of yellow.

But because the stalk grows so suddenly, it consumes all the energy of the plant. The blooming of the agave ultimately kills the plant. However amazingly, this isn't the end for the Parry's agave. The plant's blooms drop seeds which begin the life process all over again. The tiny agave plants that sprout as a result of the parent agave's seeds are called pups. With luck, many seeds will germinate and bloom and the spot that once held one large, blooming Parry's agave will yield many small pups that will someday grow as large as the parent plant.

It's a good thing that the agave is capable of producing so many new pups, because in the past the Parry's agave was used by Indigenous people and early settlers to provide food, sewing materials, candy, paint, and makeup.

There were many ways the agave could be used to produce food, but one method was to remove and trim the leaves allowing for the core to be picked and then baked or roasted. The core is the center of the agave and is protected by the leaves. Roasted agave is said to have the flavors of sweet potato, molasses, and pineapple. The process of roasting the agave left a juice residue that was used as paint for decorating buckskin. Girls even used it as blush!

The seeds that fall from an agave bloom can be ground into a flour. This flour was traditionally used as a thickener for soups (such as when making a rye) or were mixed with cereal flours when making breads.

The agave also provided a sweet treat! Agave is extremely fibrous. Chewing a chunk of this fiber would produce a sweet juice. After chewing, the tough fibers were simply discarded. By this thought process, one could then call the agave the original chewing gum!

One part of the Parry's agave provided a particularly unique sweet treat. The crown of the agave was eaten as candy! The crown is closest to the dirt and can be found at the base of the agave. It is right above the root system of the plant.

When this central bud of the plant is removed, the cavity fills with fluid. This

juice—a sap—is called *aguamiel* (honey water). When *aguamiel* ferments, it becomes an alcoholic beverage which when distilled is called mescal.

It should be noted, however, that removing the crown can cause serious damage to the plant and even possibly kill it.

The agave did more than just provide food. It also produced tools for sewing! The top thorn on the leaf was used as a needle. Fiber strands would then be attached to that thorn and could be used as the thread.

In addition early Spanish settlers used to make paper from the agave. They would do this by peeling the outer layer off the plant and letting it dry out.

The agave has become a popular plant for decorative landscaping purposes, but for many years it was a source that provided people the tools needed to survive in the desert. Its lifecycle makes it unique among the many plants of the Chihuahuan Desert!