

Yay for Yucca

A key element in becoming good at any given craft or business is to listen to the opinion of others and then determine whether those opinions are really appropriate to your style or way of thinking. Years back, I remember reading the commentary of ‘Yuk for *Yucca*’. Granted, I have seen this plant used in some poor designs, but the more I have studied how effective this plant can be for the Garden, I am far more inclined to say ‘Yay for *Yucca*’!

Yucca is in the Asparagus or Asparagaceae family and has 49 species scattered throughout North, Central and South America as well as the Caribbean. The name was somewhat erroneously penned by Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) due to the confusion with another South American native, *Manihot esculenta* whose starchy roots are the source of Tapioca! *Taíno* is an old and now extinct language spoken by the Taíno Indians that was at one time common throughout the Caribbean. The word yuca, with one ‘c’, was *Taíno* for *Manihot*. Believing that this new plant in the Asparagus Family was in fact the source of the starchy roots, Linnaeus adapted the *Taíno* name for this plant. To this day, this confusion remains since many people think that the roots of *Yucca* are edible! In addition, *Yucca* is often mistaken to be an herbaceous plant, when in actuality, it is a woody group of plants, varying in height from 3 to 20+ feet.

Yucca filamentosa was the species with which I first became acquainted on my grandfather’s farm. Commonly called Adam’s Needle or Spanish Bayonet, the thick, dark green and evergreen leaves radiate from the base much like a whirl of swords! In fact, the sharp pointed leaves were actually used by Appalachian settlers much like a hook; they



would puncture and hang slabs of

meat with the leaves in preparation for salting and curing! The species epithet was also penned by Linnaeus and refers to the long white filamentous threads that appear along the margins of the leaf. Native to drier regions of the South Eastern U.S., it is hardy in zones 5-10 and has naturalized much further north of its native provenance. Once the plant is several years old, it will produce a branched floral stem in June that will stretch to heights of 3-8’ or even greater. These stems emerge from the center of the leafy rosette with the attractive, creamy white, bell-shaped flowers (as pictured above) dangling from short side branches. As a child, I was fascinated by the tall spires of flowers! Once the plant flowers, the ‘mother



plant' typically dies and is replaced by a number of pups or offsets that appear around the original plant's base. Of the numerous selections available, 'Golden Sword' (pictured above) sports attractive bright yellow leaves with green margins and is ideal for use in the mixed border.

Another native to the Eastern half of North America is *Yucca flaccida*, which has the rather unappealing name of Weak-Leaf Yucca. Similar in height and floral display to its cousin, the older foliage of *Yucca flaccida* tend to droop downward, giving rise to the species epithet. This species was named and authored by Adrian Hardy Haworth (1767-1833), an English entomologist and botanist, who may be best known among gardeners for the succulent genus of *Haworthia*. The selection named 'Bright Edge' (pictured on the right) is a very appealing selection to gardeners since, not only do the leaves fail to droop, but the margin of the leaf is yellow with a green to bronzy green center, allowing it to brighten a Garden without appearing too brazen.



In general, *Yucca* appreciates full sun and well-drained to outright dry soil conditions. They look very lonely when planted singularly, yielding a far more effective appearance when massed. In fact, a massing of their quilled or skyward oriented leaves creates a bit of garden drama and attracts a person's attention. This is useful where a designer is attempting to highlight a walkway entrance or some other focal element in the Garden. The



image on the left is at Atlanta Botanical Garden. The mass of *Yucca* 'Golden Sword' in the center of the image draws our eye to a walkway that allows the visitor to enter the arbor at the rear of the border. With eye-grabbing garden drama, along with colorful foliage and flowers, who would not say: 'Yay for Yucca'!