



Artwork by Priscilla Fawcett

Century Plant

COMMON AND SCIENTIFIC NAMES

There are nine different species of Century Plant native to the Bahamas:

- Bahama Century Plant (*Agave bahamana*)
- Acklin Century Plant (*Agave acklinicola*)
- Anomaly Century Plant (*Agave anomola*)
- Brace's Century Plant (*Agave braceana*)
- Cacozele Century Plant (*Agave cacozele*)
- Inagua Century Plant (*Agave inaguensis*)
- Indagatorum Century Plant (*Agave indagatorum*)
- Millspaugh's Century Plant (*Agave milspaughii*)
- Nash's Century Plant (*Agave nashii*)

FAMILY

Agavaceae

DESCRIPTION

Like other members of the Agavaceae family, the Century plants of the Bahamas are semi-succulent plants but have the distinct characteristics of a basal rosette of leaves (a circular arrangement of leaves from the base) and a large flowering panicle (multi branched inflorescence).

The leaves can vary in width and length among species but they all tend to be long and rigid with a lance-like shape. They are usually a grey or green in colour and many possess sharp teeth-like spines on the edges of the leaves that end in a hard needle-like point. The inflorescence (flowering stalk) is a panicle that emerges from the centre of the plant. Among the different species, the panicle can grow up to 4-10 meters (13-32 feet) in height when mature. Yellowish flowers form at the top end attracting hummingbirds and insects with sweet nectar. The egg-shaped fruit is a capsule that holds many thin flat seeds that germinate before they are dispersed.

HABITAT AND DISTRIBUTION

The different Century plant species can be found in an array of habitats, from Pinelands, and substrate coppices, rocky and sandy coastal areas as well as fringing marsh areas.

All species native to the Bahamas are endemic (restricted) to the archipelago, with the exception of *A. anomola* that is also found in Cuba.

- *A. acklinicola* - Mayaguana, Crooked and Acklins
- *A. anomola* - San Sal and Rum Cay, Cuba
- *A. bahamana* - Exuma, Cat Island, Eleuthera, New Providence, Andros, Abaco, Grand Bahama
- *A. braceana* - San Sal and Rum Cay, Eleuthera, New Providence, Andros, Abaco and Grand Bahama
- *A. cacozela* - Eleuthera, New Providence
- *A. inaguensis* - Turks and Caicos, Inagua
- *A. indagatorum* - Ragged Island, Long Island, San Sal and Rum Cay
- *A. milsplaughii* - Exuma
- *A. nashii* - Inagua

REPRODUCTION

Century plants get their name from the myth that it blossoms once every hundred years. However, Agaves only live for as long as 8-25 years depending upon the species. Towards the end of their life, the plant produces a tall flowering panicle which will hold many, large yellowish flowers at the top. This inflorescence (flowering stalk) is so large and energy consuming that the plant dedicates all of its energy reserves to produce it and then dies (with the exception of a few species).

Very little information is known about the flowering of *A. acklinicola*. Most species of the Bahamian Agave flower during the spring and summer but some, particularly, *A. millspaughii* flower in the winter. *A. nashii* is known to flower spontaneously throughout the year.

All *Agave* can also produce suckers at their base which are literally “clones” of the parent plant.

USES AND IMPORTANCE

The interiors of the leaves contain fibres that were once used by native Americans to make twine or rope. Agave fibre from a range of species is of commercial importance, with the best quality fibre coming from the youngest leaves.

Many birds and insects also feed on the nectar produced by the enlarged flowers.

INTERESTING FACTS

Another species, *Agave sisalana*, or Sisal, has been introduced to the Bahamas and heavily cultivated for its fibrous leaves throughout many islands. The fibre is platted and used to make various items including hat, dolls and ropes.

Carbohydrates stored in the core of several species of *Agave* were fermented by native Americans to make a beverage called pulque which was used in religious ceremonies. One of the species called Blue Agave found in Tequila, Mexico is used to make tequila.