



Yucca

Yucca is one of the most dramatic families you can install in any xeric landscape. The Sonora Desert has its saguaros, but yuccas are emblematic of this part of the desert southwest.

Sometimes these plants are confused with cacti. Yuccas have thorns at the end of their sword-like leaves, and these can do damage when not handled carefully.

They are far from cactus, botanically – more akin to grasses or palms.

There are several different yuccas, and some that are called yucca, are not related. “Red yucca” (*Hesperaloe parviflora*) is wonderful, but not yucca. It is widely used for its slender leaves, lack of armament and vivid red flowers on tall stalks. Hummingbirds go wild for them. These are American natives, but from Texas.

Some true yuccas have evolved here, and you can see them all over our desert.

The biggest member of the group is the Joshua tree. It grows to 30 feet tall, although the US Forest Service states up to 70 feet. Audubon claims the trunks can be up to a yard across.

Joshua's Latin name is *Yucca brevifolia*, which means “short leaves”, and relative to its yucca cousins, they are, but these short leaves can be eight inches long.

When it flowers in the spring, the blossoms are massed together at the top of the branches.

The related Mojave yucca grows in the same general environment as the Joshua. If the Joshua is a tree with a single trunk, then the Mojave yucca is a squat shrub with multiple clustered trunks. Under ideal conditions, it grows to 16 feet tall, and the trunks, up to a foot wide. The leaves are generally about a foot and a half long, sometimes twice that.

The flowers appear on tall stalks thickly covered with creamy white blossoms; they can have purple tinges at the base. Leaves of banana yucca are two to three feet long. This plant rarely gets more than five feet tall, but there are larger and smaller ones.

Its name comes from the edible fruit, which resembles a small banana. Some authorities say it tastes more like sweet potato.

Both banana and Mojave yucca leaves can shred into coarse hairs along the edges. Native Americans used those fibers for ropes and weaving, in addition to eating the fruits.

Yuccas are a co-evolution story: their only pollinators are particular moths. In return for the favor, the moth larvae eat some of the seeds.

Other common names for these plants come from their leaves. “Spanish dagger”, “Spanish bayonet”, you know they are not warm and fuzzy.

Being so well defended, a good general principle is “look but don't touch”. These are also legally protected plants - tempting as it may be, you may not harvest one from the desert. The state has its own language, and it protects certain wild plants as “cactus, yucca, or Christmas tree”.



It is important to keep them around.

These are tough plants, surviving a tough climate. Is it any wonder they symbolize the Mojave?

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