

On the Wild Side – March, 2010
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Yucca baccata – Banana Yucca or Spanish Bayonet

Yucca baccata is an evergreen perennial that is one of the toughest native plants used in landscaping. It has the largest range of any yucca species growing in California and Nevada. It is found in parts of the Mojave, Great Basin, Sonoran and Chihuahuan Deserts and grows between 2,000 to 7,000 feet in elevation in Joshua Tree woodland and Pinyon-Juniper woodland, as well as creosote scrub habitat. This yucca is treated by some as a member of the Liliaceae (Lily Family); others call it Agavaceae (Agava Family) and some, more recently, call it a member of the Asparagus Family. The plant is trunkless and grows in a rosette form about three to four feet in height and width. It has attractive bluish-green leaves about 2 inches wide and two to 3 feet long that end in a spine and often have coarse curling fibers along the edges. Banana yucca blooms from April to June for two weeks. Spectacular white bell-shaped flowers are borne in large clusters on a stalk that nestles within the rosette of leaves. No other yucca in California or Nevada has a bigger flower. The flower is reddish brown on the outside and creamy white on the inside. It will flower many times during its lifetime, but will need to recuperate for several years after it blooms before flowering again. Flowers are pollinated by banana yucca moths (*Tegeticula baccatella*) before the fruits are formed.

Bacata means “bearing berries” referring to the fleshy or pulpy fruits that are two to six inches long and look like short green bananas. The nutritious fruits are eaten by rabbits, packrats, other rodents and other animals who help to disperse the seeds. This plant was an important source of food and fibers for native people of the Mojave Desert. The fruits were made into flour or prepared and eaten like dried apples. The large black seeds were roasted to eat or mashed into a meal or flour. Fibers from the leaves were woven into baskets and used to make sandals. The mashed roots have a soaplike compound (saponins) and were used for bathing and ritual shampooing before weddings. This yucca is very drought tolerant and extremely cold hardy. It can withstand temperatures of minus 20 degrees Fahrenheit. It prefers coarse and well drained soil and full sun is necessary for best growth. Banana yucca lends a distinctive Southwestern flavor to the landscape. It is used as an accent plant, but it can be planted beneath a window to discourage intruders. It is best to keep the needle-pointed leaves away from walkways, patios or play areas. It is a low maintenance plant. It needs room to grow and spread. It can be propagated from fresh seeds or from root divisions in spring. One of the easiest ways to increase plantings is to remove infant plants (offsets) to replant. These plants are available for sale at the Antelope Valley Conservation Nursery in Lancaster or order them from the native plant sale order forms from Desert Mountain RC&D and Oasis sponsored plant sales.

Facts for this article were obtained from the following sources:

Cacti, Agaves, and Yuccas of California and Nevada – Stephen Ingram

California Native Trees and Shrubs – Lenz and Dourley

Landscaping With Native Plants of Southern California – George Oxford Miller

Mojave Desert Wildflowers – Pam MacKay

Native Plants for Southwestern Landscapes – Judy Mielke

Shrubs and Trees of the Southern California Deserts – Jim W. Dole and Betty B. Rose

Shrubs and Trees of the Southwestern Deserts – Janice Emily Bowers