

# Yuccas only in Southwestern states

Agave: Complex plant species



## a desert place

Natural beauty  
through preservation

Presented by:  
CONSERVATION COMMITTEE of the  
Cave Creek Improvement Association

by Gladys Nisbet

Editor's Note: This is the second in a two-part series on agaves and yuccas in central Arizona.

Of the eight yuccas native to Arizona, only two are native to the central area.

*Yucca elata* is fairly common in central Arizona, but more so in the southeast Arizona and southwestern New Mexico. It prefers well-drained soils of the plains and grasslands of the desert and the broad, more open valleys of the lower sections of washes and rivers.

All yuccas are developed from a large, underground stem base. *Yucca elata* also produces a trunk which often will have two to three branches.

This trunk is from six to 15 feet high. Leaves are 10 to 18 inches long, occasionally longer. The width is only one-eighth to five-sixteenth inches wide and they are extremely thin, one-twenty-fifth

inch or one millimeter thick, which results in great flexibility.

The margins form many loose, elongated fibers and the tips are sharp-pointed.

Flowers are produced in an open-branched inflorescence which may be up to three feet long, supported by a three-foot stalk. Many are much shorter.

The sepals and petals are white or faintly cream-colored, usually 1-1/2 to 2 inches long and cup-shaped.

An open, grassy expanse dotted with *Yucca elata* in bloom is one of the desert's most beautiful sights. The previous year's stalks are often still standing and carrying their seed pods, which adds to the interest and beauty of the scene. The seed pods are dry and they split open when seeds are fully mature.

*Yucca baccata* is found from the upper desert hills and grasslands and northward over Arizona and into southern Nevada, Utah and southwestern Colorado, also eastward over

most of New Mexico. Its habitat extends from the desert hills at 2,000 feet elevation through the juniper pinon area into the southwestern oak woodlands, up to 7,000 feet elevation.

*Y. baccata* stems are largely underground, but they may be lying above ground or form short, erect stems. They do not form trunks. The rosettes may be solitary when young, but are clustered at maturity.

Leaves are usually 16 to 30 inches long to two inches wide and one-eighth inch thick. They are much stiffer than leaves of *Yucca elata*. The margins have a narrow brown edge and, at maturity, loose white hairs.

Flower stalks vary from non-existent to fairly long, so the inflorescence may be no higher than the leaves or mostly above the leaves.

The inflorescence is branched and the many white-to-cream colored flowers form a dense panicle over two feet long. The flowers may be 3-1/2 inches long, but are usually shorter. The fruits are fleshy, do not split open or hang on the flower stalk through winter. Due to the shape of the fruit, this yucca is called the banana yucca. The fruits are edible.