

Calendar

Green Thumb in Wasteland

Talk About Semi-Succulents

Mary Irish calls the plant life of Arizona's Sonora Desert, where she lives, "extremely rich." "It's not the Sahara," she reminds a reporter. But the author of *Gardening in the Desert* knows that many people new to arid climates — retirees who move west, for example — get shocked by the horticultural conditions they face.

Some think nothing will grow, so they don't even try to garden, she has discovered. "Other people try to grow things that are highly unsuitable and get depressed. But it's just a matter of adapting. If I moved to Minnesota, I'd have the same problem. I've never been

a huge forest person. I lived in West Virginia for a year and couldn't get

over how claustrophobic the place was. I mean, 90-foot trees! To me that's uncomfortable. It's pretty; it's attractive. But I always wanted to push something back; I wanted more view. I didn't want just to look up. My in-laws live in eastern Texas, which is heavily forested, and they love it! But I just see these big walls of green. It undoubtedly has to do with where you're raised."

Irish grew up on a small farm near Austin, Texas, where her family raised everything they ate. "My father wasn't much of an ornamental gardener, but he was a great vegetable gardener. So, you sort of get the bug." Her husband, Gary, is "a plants guy, too." He's "a maniac, an outstanding plantsman." He is also the coauthor of Irish's other book, *Agaves, Yuccas, and Related Plants*. On Monday, Irish will be in San

Diego to give a slide lecture about these plants — all semi-succulents, so-called because they store water as do succulents (like cacti) but have evolved many other adaptations to living in dry, hot areas.

Agave leaves are hard and covered with a waxy coating, or cuticle, in order to hold water. "The hairs that often cover the cuticle and make the plant look blue-gray or whitish are designed to keep them cool." The plants' root systems are adaptive, too. "They can respond quickly to small amounts of water." From a gardener's point of view, Irish says, these attributes make agaves easy to grow. "You can pull them out of the ground and put them on the porch for a month before transplanting them. That's just a drought, as far as they're concerned."

Yuccas like the same general growing conditions as agaves, says Irish, but generally prefer more moisture. They also have more cold tolerance than their agave relatives do.

San Diegans know best the *Yucca elephantipes*. "It is the single-most common yucca throughout the entire west." Its dark-green leaves are large and floppy.

Common in Arizona is *Yucca rigida*. "This one has blue leaves and is nice-sized, at 12 feet." Many other yuccas are much, much bigger. "Everyone I know in San Diego would love to grow it, but can't, because it likes heat."

Yucca pallida is another blue-leaved one that ought to be more common here, says Irish. "It would do beautifully. Only one foot tall, it's delightful. So that's what I'll tickle them with at the talk."

Irish will also discuss the lesser known relatives of agaves and yuccas: dasylires (pronounced day-zah-LEE-ree-ons), furcraeas (furr-CRAY-ahs), and manfredas (man-FRAY-das).

"They grow in many of the same habitats as agaves and yuccas, side by side."

Why do some plants become familiar, while others remain obscure? Do dasylires and the others simply need a publicist?

Part of the answer has to do with adaptability — this time, the plant's to its environment. Have they traveled well? Were they rugged enough to survive the trip beyond their native habitat? And once they got there, could they grow well in conditions that weren't always favorable?

If so, the rest of the answer has to do with business. "Some beautiful plants — agaves — haven't come into



Agave sebastiana

commerce yet. *Agave sebastiana* is one of the most beautiful agaves I've ever seen, but you really gotta hunt for it. It comes from a little island called Sebastiana, off the coast of Baja."

A publicist could make something of the way most agave species end their lives — dramatically. It happens because they are monocarpic — that is, they bloom only once, then die. "Many bromeliads have the same feature but don't grow so big," says Irish. "Relative to the size of the plant, an agave bloom is enormous. Even a tiny agave, six or eight inches tall, will have a bloom six or eight feet tall."

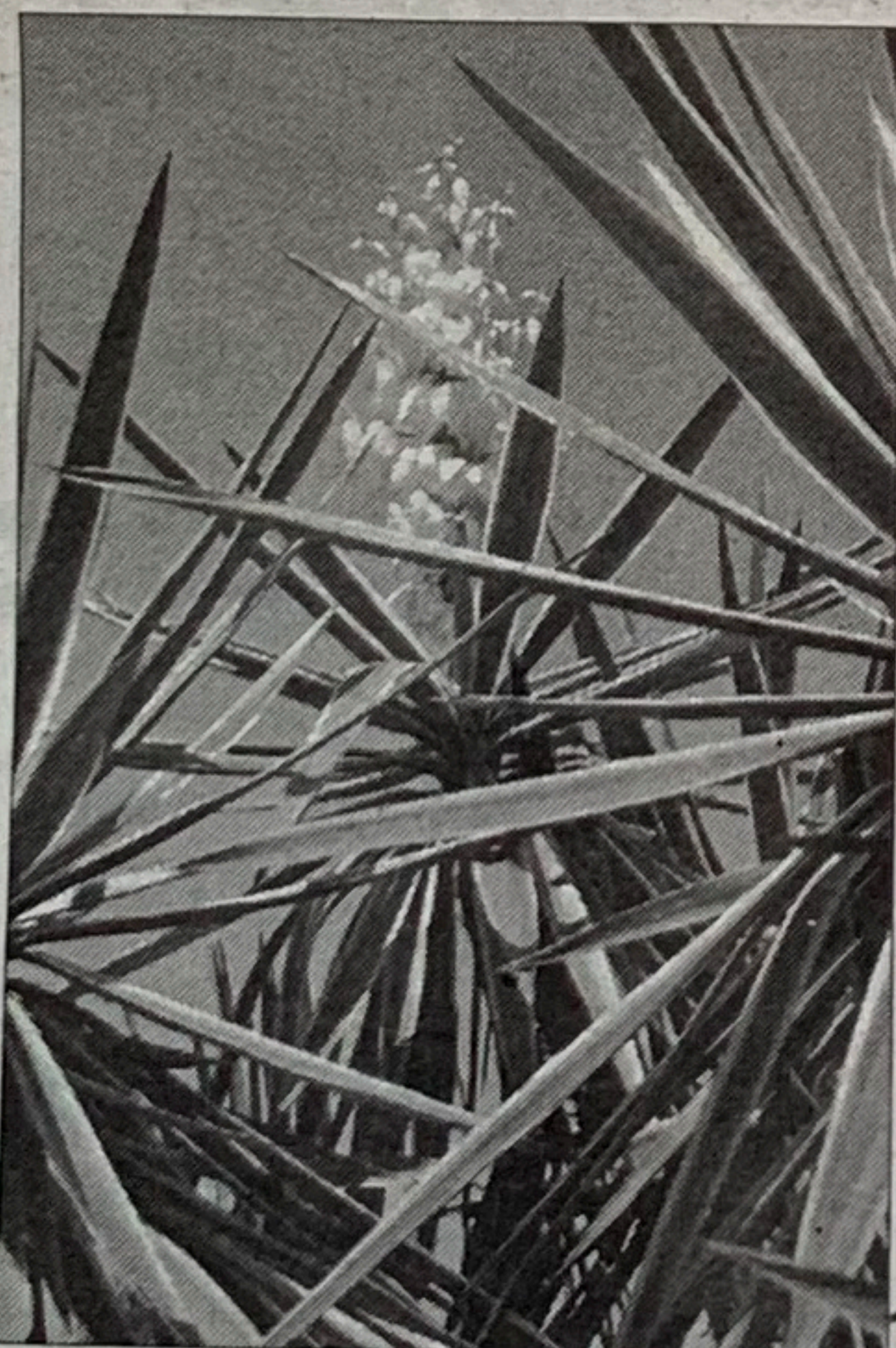
What's the adaptive reason for this? Irish has never heard a satisfactory explanation. "From an agave's point of view, it doesn't seem practical, because

the plant has taken all its sugars and carbohydrates and invested them in that bud. That's why it's so big. But then it kills the plant," which in many cases is 25 or 30 years old.

The epilogue, at least, is happy, for most agave species. Upon their deaths, their "pups," growing beneath them, start to thrive.

— Jeanne Schinto

Slide talk by Mary Irish:
"Agaves, Yuccas, and their Relatives"
Monday, September 10,
6:30-9:00 p.m.
San Diego Horticultural Society
Satellite Wagering Facility
Del Mar Fairgrounds, Del Mar
Free Info: 760-630-7307



Yucca elephantipes

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