

Agave americana L.

Family: Agavaceae

Common names: American agave, American aloe, Spreading century plant

Century plants are popular ornamental plants that are native to Central America, southern North and northern South America. *Agave americana* is no exception and as a result of its widespread cultivation, has become naturalised in many regions globally, including South Africa. Although it is often called the 'American aloe', it is not at all related to members of the genus *Aloe*, many of which are indigenous to South Africa.

Description

Agave americana is a suckering, evergreen monocarpic, multi-annual, with very large, succulent leaves arranged in a rosette, often reaching a height of 2 m. The long lanceolate (sword-shaped) leaves, 0.8–2.0 × 0.15–0.25 m, are borne on a short stem thickened by the prominent leaf bases. Leaves are grey-green, sometimes with a pale central stripe or yellow leaf margins, and a waxy coating. Leaf margins are nearly straight to crenate, creamy white and armed with variable teeth of up to 10 mm long and 10–40 mm apart. The apices of leaves bear sharp, dark brown, conical or subulate spines of mostly 20–60 mm long.



Figure: *Agave Americana* in Vredenburg

Ecology

Agave americana is visited and likely pollinated by birds, bats and insects, even in its adopted habitats in southern Africa. Seed is dispersed mainly by wind. Owing to its suckering habit, these plants form large colonies that impact on the growth of other species. Dense, naturalised stands can have negative effects in blocking movement of livestock and preventing them from gaining entry into fields for grazing.

Distribution and habitat

Agave americana is native to Mexico and some parts of the southern United States of America. It is widely cultivated and has become naturalised in many parts of South Africa and other temperate, sub-tropical and semi-arid regions of the world.

In South Africa the plant was introduced in the 1960s and now it is spreading across the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Free State, Northern Cape, Limpopo, and Mpumalanga and is listed as invasive in western cape.

In both its natural distribution range and where it has become naturalised, this species is found growing around old habitations, bare sand, banks of watercourses and along roadsides. It also grows in desert scrub, open woodlands and grasslands, at altitudes of 500–1 300 m. It is drought resistant and prefers full sun and well-drained soil.

Conservation Status

A. americana is a large, rhizomatous succulent that grows in a wide range of habitats and soil types. Additionally, it is tolerant to salt spray, high temperatures, and extreme drought. Because this species spread by seeds, but also vegetatively by bulbils and rhizomes, it has the potential to escape from cultivation and rapidly colonize disturbed sites, roadsides, bare sand and coastal areas ([ISSG, 2016](#)). Currently, *A. americana* is considered a serious environmental weed by the IUCN ([ISSG, 2016](#)) and it is listed as invasive in many countries in Europe as well as in China, Japan, **South Africa**, Namibia, Tanzania, Bermuda, Australia, New Zealand, and New Caledonia among others.

Agave Americana is naturalised in South Africa and is thus not assessed in the Red List of South African plants. It is listed as a category 3 invasive species in Western Cape but is not on the national list for South Africa. Category 3 Listed Invasive Species are species that are listed by notice in terms of section 70(1)(a) of the National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act, 2004 (ACT NO. 10 OF 2004), and alien and invasive species regulations, as species which are subject to exemptions in terms of section 71(3) and prohibitions in terms of section 71A of Act, as specified in the Notice. This simply mean that it can no longer be planted in Western Cape.

There is a high risk of new introductions of *Agave americana*. This species is widely commercialized around the world for its ornamental value. Additionally, it has the potential to spread by seeds, daughter plants, and stem fragments which are easily carried to new sites by ocean tides, deliberate plantings, soil movement, and dumped vegetation

References

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