

Plant of the Month

Yucca glauca – Great Plains yucca, soapweed

Family: *Asparagaceae*, asparagus family

Habit: Evergreen shrub with robust root system; leaves 40- 60 cm long; inflorescence 50 – 100 cm long; white to greenish-white flowers arranged on a tall stalk; fruit is a pod that is 5- 9 cm long; flowers from May-July.

Habitat: Sandy places, dry slopes, and grasslands; often found in disturbed areas; 3,800 – 9,000 ft.

Yuccas are tough, and if they could talk, I bet they would snarl, “Don’t try me.” The leaves are stout and pointed like little swords; get too close, and you’ll get stabbed. They are built for hot, dry weather but are also cold-hardy. The roots of *Yucca glauca* can reach depths greater than 20 feet, with lateral roots extending 20 to 30 feet. Yuccas spread by seed and rhizomes. There are 6 different species of Yucca in Colorado.



A mutually beneficial relationship exists between yucca plants and yucca moths from the genera *Tegeticula* and *Parategeticula*. Without one another, neither may continue to exist. The yucca relies on the moth to pollinate, and the moth needs the yucca seeds to feed its offspring. Adult moths emerge from their cocoons in spring as the yuccas are blooming and begin the search for a mate. Adult yucca moths do not have a long tongue like other moths or butterflies – this is because there is no need for feeding as their life is very short. The male will die shortly after mating, but the female still has work to do. She will gather pollen from one yucca flower, store it under her chin, and find a blossom that doesn’t already have larvae (too many eggs will cause the fruit to fail). Once the moth mama has found an unoccupied blossom, she will lay her eggs and deposit the pollen from her chin onto the flower's stigma, thereby ensuring fertilization and food for her young.

You may have seen yucca or yuca (pronounced yoo-ka) root sold in stores or on the menu of Latin American restaurants. These roots are from the cassava plant (*Manihot esculenta*), not a plant from the *Yucca* genus. The leaves and roots of various yucca species, including *Y. glauca*, contain saponins, which are released through crushing and create a sudsy substance for washing – hence the name soapweed. Fibers can be shredded from the leaves and used to make brooms, rope, sandals, and ceremonial masks. The flowers of some yucca species are reportedly bitter and unpleasant to the taste, but the flowers of *Yucca glauca* have a subtle, sweet flavor that is sought out by various wildlife and livestock.



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Yucca moth on yucca flower

Ann Cooper



Mature *Yucca glauca* fruit pods

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