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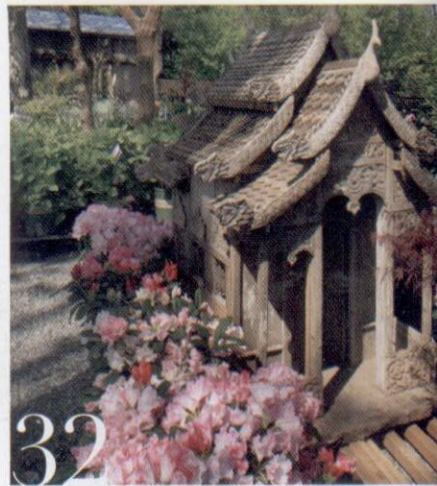
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ON THE COVER

The collected paraphernalia—photos, trial books, notes, badges and flower samples—that represent a week at the California Pack Trials. Editor Chris Beytes spent weeks sifting through it all to bring you the new variety coverage that begins on page 28 (and page 68 of *GrowerTalks*).

A YUCCA ADDICT IS BORN

WRITTEN BY **STEPHANIE COHEN**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **TERRA NOVA NURSERIES**

When I first started to teach, write and speak about perennials, I called yuccas “yucky yuccas.” Sometimes it takes adversity and some keen problem solving to change gears. During the last few years we’ve had to deal with droughts and water restriction issues. Sustainability has also become something gardeners need to keep in mind. Yuccas help address both. Not only are they sustainable, but they also last a long time with minimal moisture. I’ve always said if you kill a yucca, your next purchase is plastic flowers.

At first I thought yuccas were only for modern homes with minimalist designs, or for homes that had a southwestern flavor. You know what I mean—a yucca, a grass, a stone crop and an extra-large boulder. In the last few years we’ve gotten away from looking at just flowers and now look at a plant’s foliage, as well. Yucca’s upright foliage is a per-



fect foil for other fine-textured foliage, and bold, rounded leaves. Even in the driest of spots it'll keep its form.

Yucca's sword-shaped leaves are not a given. Some, in fact, are needlelike.

Some can be thick and tough, others pliable and some rigid. Commonly, foliage color is green to gray-green. Its common names, Adam's needle or Spanish bayonet, tells you that these are not good plants to take a nap on in the garden. In severe drought, you may have to water once or twice a month, according to the books. I have never done that and nothing died. I don't think yuccas read the same books. They are truly full-sun plants and the key to success is good drainage, and good drainage, *ad nauseum*. They prefer a location with minimal winter dampness and a slightly gritty soil. I grow mine in garden soil with clay substrate. So far, so good. Remember, wet roots (or wet feet) will give them pneumonia, and the prognosis is looking for an appropriate tombstone.

You will notice I haven't mentioned flowers. This is usually a sign that they are very small or just ugly, but this is not the case for yuccas. The waxy, bell-shaped flowers appear in midsummer and, believe it or not, are fragrant, especially at night. The flowers hang down in large panicles from a central stem, which makes them rather showy.

For those people who need something at the rear of their property, along the property line, a fence, or in an out-of-the-way bed, yuccas are the perfect plant. Now add a tall, ornamental native grass like *Panicum virgatum* 'Shendoah' or 'Northwind,' whose plumes dance for you in the fall. Add an equally drought-tolerant stone crop, such as 'Autumn Fire' or 'Purple Emperor,' whose purple leaves will match 'Shendoah.' You can leave out the obligatory rock and try *Rudbeckia*

fulgida subsp. *fulgida*, a very late, mid-sized black-eyed Susan, and you'll have a very low-maintenance and drought-resistant garden. One other thing: Bambi (Mr., Mrs. or Junior) are not fond of yuccas or grasses. Stone crops, however, are on their appetizer menu.

Now let's get away from the common, green garden varieties and discuss some really hot, new cultivars that will perk up your garden with exactly the same sterling characteristics. I call this part "creating plant lust."

Yucca filamentosa, commonly called Adam's needle, is hardy in Zones 4-9. It grows about 3-4 feet tall, but when the flower stems emerge they can grow to be 6 feet tall or more. I think they took double doses of vitamins as young plants. It has creamy-white, pendant flowers and will bedazzle you for several weeks. You can use them as a cut flower, but I couldn't do that. The cultivar called 'Bright Edge' has the typical sword-shaped leaves, but with a spectacular golden edge on the green leaf. The effect is handsome and different. The leaves of *Y. filamentosa* 'Color Guard' have a large yellow center with a small green edge. It tends to get a dab of bright coral along the edge as winter approaches, along with the other variegation. This provides great color through the seasons. Its flower is similar to the variety above. 'Gold Edge' is similar to 'Bright Edge,' but has thinner leaves and a pale-yellow margin. Similar but shorter at 3 feet is 'Ivory

Towers.' The sword-shaped leaves have gray-green edges and gray-green streaks down an ivory center. Yes, it's striped. Now, that's a hot new twist! If these are too showy for you, 'Variegata' has just a white margin, which does color echo the leaves. It's good to have choices!

My new favorite is *Yucca rostrata* 'Sapphire Skies,' commonly called blue-beaked yucca. It is hardy in Zones 6-9 and needs the same good drainage, but prefers an alkaline soil. It usually prefers a somewhat sheltered location out of the wind. It has powder blue-gray-colored leaves that are fine and short. Over the years it will form an upright, unbranched tree with a stout trunk up to 4 feet. In the meantime, this little beauty will be 16 inches tall for a while. Blue green is one of those hard-to-find colors, but needs repetition in the garden. Lamb's ears 'Countess Helene von Stein' (also known as 'Big Ears') may do just that. Looking for a different combination, you may try *Veronica incana* (also known as wooly speedwell), grown primarily for its leaves. Just remember both of these melt out (that's Southern for "bite the dust") in hot, humid areas. If you have dry heat, it'll work. Personally, give me any stone crop that won't give a darn about the weather.

Yuccas are on the march right into your beds, borders and containers. There is nothing better for the hot, dog days of summer and our extended fall season. **GP**

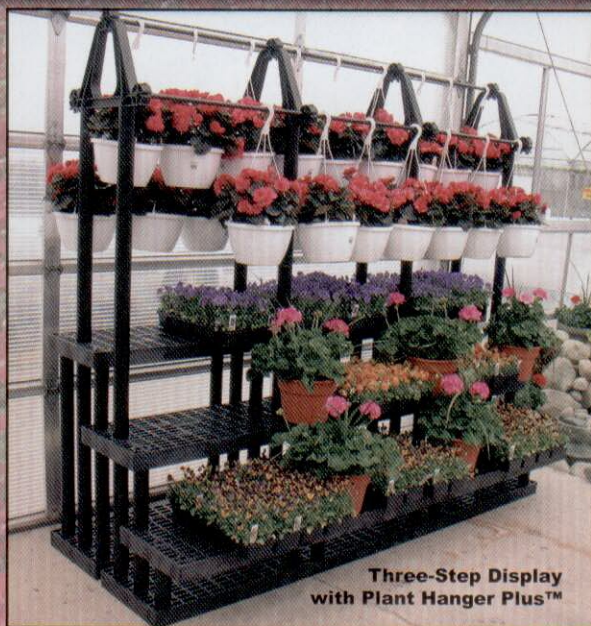
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