

Agaves

A Cultivation Guide.



Agave *gentryi* in the Tresco abbey gardens

Agave are group of plants that have been used by the people of Mesoamerica for well over 9,000 years, so there is nothing new about growing these magnificent succulents. However, these fabulous succulents do need some special treatment if they are to succeed in European environments. This guide can be used to help increase your chances of success with these desirable succulents.

Growing Agave in the ground in the UK and Northern Europe is possible but only when the right growing conditions are provided. Many Agave are capable of taking subzero temperatures, it is the wet and damp conditions that are challenging for these succulents. If you want to try growing an Agave outside you must follow a few basic rules:

Choose the right species. We suggest starting with one of the following: *Agave montana*, *Agave havardiana*, *Agave chrysantha* or even *Agave bracteosa*. Try to plant as big a specimen as possible- A plant in a 5 litre pot or bigger is ideal. If you have a smaller Agave, try to grow the plant on for a couple of years before planting out. Next choose the right position. The site must be well drained and south facing. It helps if the position is open but sheltered from cold winter winds, so no crowded perennial beds or



Agave chrysantha in france (picture by Herve Bellon)

overhanging deciduous trees. A site that is raised or sloping is ideal. Planting out any succulents is best done in late spring after the last frost. Covering the proposed site with black plastic sheeting several months prior to planting will help warm the soil up.

Having chosen your Agave and position the next task is to prepare the ground. Dig a hole around about 1.5 meters wide and 80cm deep. Discard any clay or heavy soils. Fill the hole to two thirds with any clean hardcore- this can be clean broken brick or stone. Avoid using lumps of concrete or rubble contaminated by cement. Now pour a grit over this hardcore layer. The best grit is Pumice, but this can be expensive, potting grit is a good second. Now mix your back fill ready for planting. Mix soil and compost with potting grit to give an extremely loose well grained mix. I would recommend 15% soil, 40% compost (we recommend using a Nursery stock compost) and 45% potting grit or pumice. A very small amount of slow

release fertiliser can be added as well as volcanic rock dust for mineralisation. Finally plant your Agave using your mixed back fill. Keep the neck of your plant slightly higher than the surrounding ground level and firm gently around the plant. Top dress with an appropriate gravel to help stabilise the soil surface around your new Agave. Stand back and Admire. Agave do need water in the summer so water when there has been no rain for a week or so. Once the Autumn approaches it is time to think about winter protection for your plant. The level and type of protection depends on the prevailing weather and your latitude. In Southern coastal England Agave grow well without protection, while in Yorkshire Agaves will need maximum protection to just survive.

Protection from Wet is the most important factor. To do this create a sloping clear roof over the Agave. Start by banging four strong timber posts into the ground in a square around your Agave. The posts should be just above the height of the plant and with two posts set higher. Now screw a sheet of Perspex or polycarbonate to



the top of the posts. The resulting roof should cover the Agave, with room to spare and allow water to drain off the roof and away from the plant. Having protected your Agave from the wet, the next problem will be extremes of cold and driving snow. If bad weather is forecast you may want to wrap fleece around the upright posts, creating a cocoon. But remember to remove the fleece as soon as possible to avoid damp air getting trapped around the plant.

Agave can also be grown in pots and given winter protection under unheated glass or well lit covered area. Pot culture requires similar conditions to those of Agave grown in the ground. An extremely free draining compost mix, excellent drainage and plenty of ventilation. A good potting mix is as follows: 40% multipurpose compost, 40% horticultural grit or pumice, 10% small pine bark chips, 10% silver sand or Cornish grit. Add to this a small amount of slow release fertiliser (Osmocote works well) and, if available, some volcanic rock dust for mineralization. Always try to keep your Agave high in the pot and top dress around the base of the plant with gravel or pumice. Avoid over potting, for example, repotting into a pot that is wider than the plant or much deeper than the previous container. Always choose a pot that has plenty of drainage holes- if there are not enough drainage holes, drill out some more!

Watering pot grown Agave should only be necessary from late spring to early autumn and then only when there has been little or no rain for a few weeks. Water small plants by standing the pot in a few inches of water for a couple of hours and then lift and allow to drain fully. Larger plants that are too heavy to lift, can be watered by pouring water around the rim of the pot. Overhead watering is not advisable.

Over wintering Agave should be done in an unheated glass house or cold conservatory. Plants that are kept in this way can deal with very cold spells (-15C and colder), But it is advisable to provide good ventilation when ever the sun is out. Moving you Agave outside again in spring should be done in stages, firstly move the plant to a lightly shady spot for a couple of weeks and then move to full sunshine, this will avoid the plant being scorched.