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Agave lophantha by Colin C. Walker

Much of the appeal of agaves lies in them being attractive architectural plants, usually but not always with strong spines on the leaf tips and with prominent sharp teeth along the leaf edges. Additionally many species have attractive leaf markings with bud imprints. This species exemplifies these characteristics and would enhance any collection.

Agave lophantha when fully grown has a rosette up to 60cm in diameter and 1m tall and when mature has a short stem. The rosettes have an open, spreading appearance with prominent greyish horny leaf margins bearing smallish teeth; the terminal leaf spines, being no more than 1cm long, are relatively short compared to those of other agaves (Fig.3). The leaves are predominantly dark green in colour, but many clones such as the one illustrated here have a prominent pale green mid-stripe. This distinct colour contrast together with the symmetrical rosettes are in my opinion its most appealing features.



Fig.1 *Agave lophantha*
'Quadricolor'

The plant shown here has been in my collection for 18 years and is at least 20 years old. It offsets prolifically and I have removed more than 50 of these to maintain the symmetry of a single rosette and to provide propagating material which has been widely distributed amongst interested growers. In all this time it has not yet flowered so I have not personally witnessed the flower spike which is reported to be up to 4.5m tall (Gentry, 1982).

When bedded-out to provide free root room and space to grow to its full potential, *A. lophantha* can form extensive clumps (Fig.2).

Gentry (1982) records its natural distribution as extending "from south-eastern Texas southward in Mexico along the east coast to central Veracruz. It is frequent on limestone, as on cliffs and rocky outcrops".

Irish & Irish (2000) record that it has demonstrated cold tolerance down to -7°C if kept dry, so it is a tough plant. My experience of cultivation is that this is an easy species to grow and it has survived over winter in an unheated greenhouse in southern England when kept completely dry.

The origin of the species name '*lophantha*', first published in 1829, is somewhat obscure; when translated from the Greek this means 'crested flower' for which no plausible explanation has yet been provided (Eggl & Newton, 2004)! In contrast this species is often identified as *Agave univittata*, this species name meaning 'having a single longitudinal stripe'. This name characteristically describes my plant, so it is regrettable that *A. univittata* is now considered to be a redundant later synonym, dating from 1831 (Thiede, 2001).

Fig.2 A clump of *Agave lophantha* roughly 2m across growing in the Duthie Park Collection, Aberdeen.





Fig.3 *Agave lophantha* in a 30cm diameter pot.

Agave lophantha is most closely related to the common and widespread *Agave lechuguilla* with which it is often confused and with which it hybridises and intergrades in the wild (Irish & Irish, 2000). The two species can be distinguished by the broader flat leaf of *A. lophantha* with little or no striation and a weak terminal spine.

In addition to the standard species, I also grow a variegated form named *A. lophantha* 'Quadricolor' (Fig.1). This also offsets freely, so again to maintain the symmetry of a single rosette and also to provide propagating material I routinely remove the pups. This plant is especially attractive and is aptly named for having leaves with different coloured stripes. The leaves have stripes in three shades of green with a broad yellow to cream margin (in the older leaves the yellow changes to become cream). I am not aware that the origin of this cultivar has been recorded.

References

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