Agave ×leopoldii
Colin C. Walker (c.walker702@btinternet.com)

Agave ×leopoldii is a garden hybrid and hence unknown in the wild. This cultivar was first described in 1893 by the renowned Victorian gardener William Watson at Kew having been raised by Dr W.B. Kellock in his garden at Stamford Hill, London, around the mid 1880s. It was named in honour of King Leopold II of Belgium (King from 1865 till 1909), who saw and admired the plant when it was exhibited at the RHS show in Islington in 1893 (Figueiredo & Smith, 2013). For the last century or so this plant has proved to be robust in cultivation and hence is reasonably well known. Its parentage is recorded as Agave filifera × Agave schidigera. However, it should be noted that there is some uncertainty regarding this parentage and I suggest that one of the parents may be Agave geminiflora which has much narrower leaves and hence of similar dimensions to those of A. ×leopoldii.

This hybrid is one of the filiferous agaves, a group of attractive plants that are characterised by the production of fine or broad fibres or threads that peel off from the leaf margins (Walker, 2020). In contrast to many other agaves these do not produce prominent sharp teeth on their leaf margins. Short sharp terminal spines are also produced which are dark when newly formed but turn grey with age. Another general characteristic leaf feature is the production of prominent bud-imprints which result from the new leaves being produced in tight buds. To date there has been no satisfactory explanation provided to account for the production of the numerous threads on these plants. Unlike the prominent and often fierce marginal teeth and terminal spines produced by other agaves, the fibres of filiferous agaves are unlikely to deter herbivores from feeding on the plants.

My largest specimen of A. ×leopoldii (Fig. 1) has grown reasonably quickly to form a rosette about 55 cm diameter. Over the years it has produced a few offsets which have been removed to maintain the symmetry of a single rosette, providing propagating material so the plant is easily maintained in cultivation.
New leaves form a tight 'bud' that is angled to one side of the rosette. Of the filiferous agaves in my collection, *A. ×leopoldii* has the longest and narrowest leaves: these are numerous, fibrous, up to 45 cm long and narrow, only 1 cm across at the base with white stripes on both sides, tapering to a sharp tip. These leaves are therefore outside the typical ranges for the proposed parents but closer to those of *A. geminiflora*. The principal appeal of *A. ×leopoldii* comes from the filaments produced along the leaf margins that are pure white and detach at their tips from the leaves to become curiously curly. These have a fine, straw-like texture, not at all hair-like.

For this architectural plant I chose a chunky, glossy black-glazed pan to contrast with the delicate white filaments. I am delighted to report that this plant received the accolades of first prizes in the unrestricted pot class for an *Agave* at two BCSS Glasgow Branch shows.

In June 2022 my largest specimen of *A. ×leopoldii* flowered (Fig. 2) after 10 years in the collection. It has the typical unbranched spike of flowers of *Agave* subgenus *Littaea*. The spike is only 1.35 m tall and so this is of relatively modest dimensions compared to many agave flower spikes, the most impressive of
Left: Fig. 2. *Agave × leopoldii* in flower in the conservatory, August 2022.

Above: Fig. 3. Close-up of the flowers of *A. × leopoldii*.
which can be up to 10+ m tall! Flowers (Fig. 3) are produced in clusters of 2, 3 or 4, each being up to 6 cm long of which 3 cm is the narrow flower tube bearing 6, strongly recurved and curled lobes. The flowers open from the base of the spike upwards, with dozens of flowers open simultaneously. (The flowering of A. ×leopoldii is, incidentally, the eighth agave I have flowered in the last 10 years. A plant of A. victoriae-reginae also flowered at the same time.)

Additionally there is a variegated cultivar named A. ×leopoldii ‘Hammer Time’. It is similar to the typical A. ×leopoldii but differs in having pale green marginal stripes (Fig. 4). In my limited experience it is, not unsurprisingly, a slower-growing plant. My plant is currently about 30 cm in diameter and readily produces offsets which again I remove to maintain symmetry and to provide cuttings. This cultivar was named in honour of the renowned American plantsman Gary Hammer “who discovered this form on a trip to Mexico” (Spath & Moore, 2019). However, since the original A. ×leopoldii is a hybrid produced in a London garden, a variegate found growing naturally in Mexico cannot be a form of it! This variegate might therefore be more appropriately named simply as Agave ‘Hammer Time’.

Agave ×leopoldii is relatively frost hardy and will survive winters in the UK in unheated glasshouses if kept completely dry. However, I have yet to test the frost-hardiness of A. ‘Hammer Time’. I personally have no experience of outdoor cultivation of these plants but I expect them to thrive in Australian gardens and to flower over much shorter time scales.

References

Figueiredo, E. & Smith, G.F. (2013) Proposal to conserve the name Agave ×leopoldii


Fig. 4. Agave ‘Hammer Time’ in a 20 cm-diameter pan.

JOAN CAIRIS TROPHY
BEST MATCH BETWEEN POT AND EXHIBIT
Ian Hay

For many years, the late Joan Cairis (Joan passed away in June 2016) was an avid competitor in CESNSW Shows. She was also a great stickler for the rules and was never afraid to enquire about the decisions made by judges at those shows. Because her entries were of such a high quality, Joan could easily have entered more of her plants in the Open Sections of the Show. Had she done so, she could have gained extra competition points during the last few years when she was still classified as a “novice” competitor (i.e., a member for less than seven years). However, she refrained from doing so, saying that while the rules allowed it, she did not feel it was fair to other novice competitors to do so. When Joan did finally graduate into the open competition, she continued to win her fair share of prizes and to delight the judges with the high quality of her entries.