

# The Augusta Chronicle

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## COLUMNS

# Campbell Vaughn: Though century plants take ages to bloom, they're worth the wait

**Campbell Vaughn** Columnist

Published 4:05 a.m. ET June 14, 2024 | Updated 4:05 a.m. ET June 14, 2024

On our annual pilgrimage to Jekyll Island to spend a few days with my family at the beach, I was tasked to be the family chauffeur. Being the driver has its perks because we have a rule that the driver gets to control the radio. That means I don't have to listen to some of that abysmal caterwauling my children seem to enjoy.

As we headed down Highway 25 South, I spotted what I only see every couple of years in the landscape. A century plant (*Agave americana*) was blooming. I hollered for the kids to look, but they were too deep into their phones to see it before we passed. I think one of them might have uttered "nerd" toward me because of my enthusiasm.

It was their loss because when century plants bloom, it is a true showstopper.

*Agave americana* is a rosette-forming perennial succulent that is native to Mexico. The genus name comes from the Greek word *agauos*, meaning admirable or noble in probable reference to the very tall flower spikes found on the plants of many species of *Agave*.

It has been introduced and has naturalized in several areas around the world. This succulent grows best in sandy, dry to medium moisture and full sun. Good drainage is important because of root rot issues. From a landscape design perspective, the century plant is a good specimen to use in the right place. The grayish green color with the leaves being waxy smooth with spiny edges is a texture and color contrast that is hard to find.

Probably the greatest feature about the plant is the infrequent but spectacular bloom. The common name of century plant suggests the plant will live 100 years before flowering. In reality, outdoor plants typically bloom between the 10th and 25th years while indoor plants rarely flower. When an outdoor plant blooms, it sends up a single, stout, erect flowering stalk from the center of the basal rosette of leaves to up to 30 feet high. The flowering stalk

resembles a narrow telephone pole with horizontal branching near the top. The greenish-yellow flowers bloom in panicles at the branch ends. It is an incredible show, and then the plant dies. These types of plants are categorized as monocarpic -- blooms once and then croaks.

**Campbell Vaughn:** You should not kill snakes, but you should get to know them

The legacy of the century plant is established by suckers at the base of each rosette over time leading to a colony of new plants.

With only the occasional slug or snails damaging the foliage or a root rot issues in poorly-drained or overly-moist soils, this agave can be a low maintenance solution for an area where other plants might not survive. The century plant serves as an interesting tropical accent or specimen. It is a large and showy plant for the landscape but certainly needs a large space in which to grow. It will grow well in containers as an indoor plant at a much smaller size.

Don't be in a hurry for this plant to bloom. When it does, though, it will be quite a show.