



Shin Dagger

The dangerous yet useful lechuguilla.

Ever been jabbed by a lechuguilla (*Agave lechuguilla*)? If so, then you know exactly why this long-leaved succulent — an indicator species of the Chihuahuan Desert — has another common name: shin dagger.

Indeed, a knife-sharp point tips the ends of lechuguilla's narrow green leaves, armed with downward-pointing spines along their straight sides. Other tactics ensure survival for this drought-tolerant kin of yuccas, agaves and century plants. During rainfall, a lechuguilla — which grows no higher than one or two feet — quickly generates more roots and stores moisture within its rosette base and fleshy leaves.

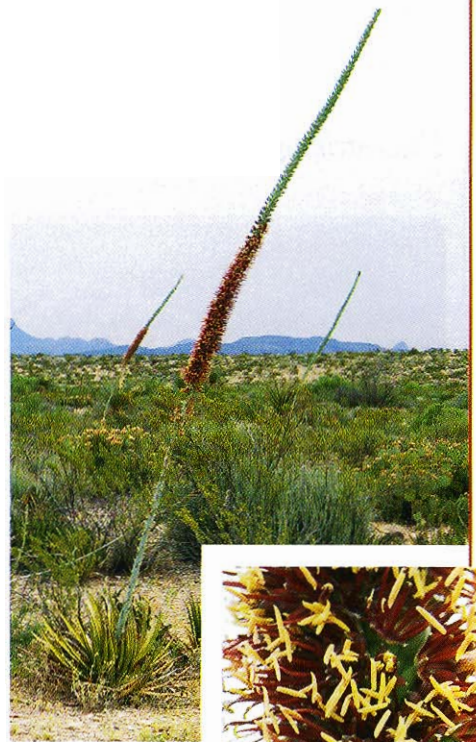
Extremely slow growing, a lechuguilla reaches maturity within 10 to 20 years. After storing up enough nutrients, the plant shoots up a single flower stalk (grow rates average 8 inches a day!) that stands 3 to 13 feet high. Blooms last about 96

hours, then the plant dies. No need to wait for seeds to germinate, though. Lechuguillas multiply primarily by suckers, which enables them to spread into thorny colonies.

You'd think so many barbs would keep wildlife — and people — at a distance, but not so. Many small mammals and reptiles of the Chihuahuan Desert hide beneath lechuguillas. Mockingbirds, cactus wrens and other bird species nest within its leaves. As for humans, Mexican farmers harvest the tough fibers — called *ixtle* — from lechuguilla leaves and work them into durable ropes, brushes and baskets. Flower stalks provide building material for roofs, walls and fences.

Lechuguilla roots — as well as leaves — contain saponin, a foaming compound used to make shampoos and detergents. Now you know how lechuguilla came by its other common name: soapbush. ★

— Sheryl Smith-Rodgers



↑ The lechuguilla has to work for many years to produce a giant stalk of flowers, then it dies.

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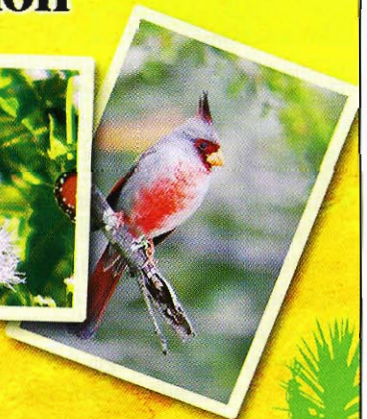
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