

The history and flowering of *Agave ×leopoldii*

by Colin C. Walker

Agave ×leopoldii is an attractive 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 Royal Horticultural Society show in Islington in 1893 (Figueiredo & Smith, 2013).

According to Drummond (1912):

“Mr. Kellock believed it to have originated as the result of crossing *A. filifera*, SalmDyck, with *A. princeps*, Hort. ... What the identity of ‘*A. princeps*,’ suggested as one of the parents of our plant, may be it has been impossible to ascertain, but the matter is not now of material consequence, since it is found, now that the plant has flowered, that its characters negative the suggestion that it is a hybrid...On the contrary these characters clearly point to its being a perfectly valid species”.

This he named and illustrated as *A. disceptata* (Fig. 1) for its ‘deceptive’ status. This name, however, and its species status have never been widely accepted and it is now considered to be a synonym of *A. ×leopoldii* (Figueiredo & Smith, 2013).

In summary, the parentage of this hybrid is recorded as *Agave filifera* × *Agave princeps* but the latter is a name of uncertain status not currently recognised by any agave authority. Whatever its parentage, *A. ×leopoldii* has, for over a century, proven



Fig 1

Agave disceptata (from Drummond, 1912)



Fig 2

to be robust in cultivation, readily propagated and hence reasonably well known.

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. ×leopardii* (Fig. 2) has grown reasonably quickly to form a rosette about 55cm in 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.

Agave ×leopardii
in a 30cm-
diameter black-
glazed ceramic
pan

New leaves form a tight 'bud' that is angled to one side of the rosette. Of the filiferous agaves in my collection, *A. ×leopardii* has the longest and narrowest leaves: these are numerous, fibrous, up to 45cm long and narrow, only 1cm across at the base with white stripes on both sides, tapering to a sharp tip.

The principal appeal of *A. ×leopardii* 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 British Cactus and Succulent Society Glasgow Branch shows.

In June 2022 this large specimen of *A. ×leopardii* flowered (Fig. 3) after 10 years in the collection. It has the typical unbranched spike of flowers of *Agave* subgenus *Littaea*. The spike reached only 1.35m tall and so this is of relatively modest dimensions compared to many agave flower spikes, the most impressive of which can be up to 10+m tall!

Flowers (Fig. 4) are produced in clusters of two, three or four, each being up to 6cm long of which 3cm is the narrow flower tube bearing six, strongly recurved and curled lobes. The flowers open from the base of the spike upwards, with dozens of flowers opening simultaneously. Young flowers are pale green fading to pale pink at the margins with slightly darker green mid-stripes. In contrast older flowers are dusky pink with darker brown mid-stripes. The top of the flower spike, with only a few unopened buds remaining, is shown on the front cover.

As with all agaves the flowering rosette is monocarpic, meaning it flowers once and then dies. However, my plant of *A. ×leopardii* has produced a number of offsets over the years and two remained attached to the main rosette.



Fig 3

Agave ×leopardii in flower in the conservatory, August 2022

After flowering these were removed and potted up, while the main plant was consigned to the compost heap. Its attractive pot was used to accommodate another architectural agave.

There is also a variegated cultivar named *A. \times leopoldii* 'Hammer Time'. It is similar to the typical *A. \times leopoldii* but differs in having pale green marginal stripes (Fig. 5). In my limited experience it is, not unsurprisingly, slower-growing. My plant is currently about 25cm 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. \times leopoldii* was a hybrid produced in a London garden, a variegate found growing naturally in Mexico cannot be a form of it! This variegate is, therefore, more appropriately named simply as *Agave* 'Hammer Time'.

Agave \times 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'. ■

Photos: Colin C. Walker



Fig 4

Close-up of the flowers of *Agave \times leopoldii*

References

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Fig 5

Agave 'Hammer Time' in a 20cm-diameter pan