

A new species from Mexico :

Agave wendtii Cházaro

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In the Mexican Cactus and Succulent Journal (*Cactaceas y Suculentas Mexicanas*), I described a brand new species, namely *Agave wendtii* (Cházaro, 1995). As this journal is in spanish this could prevent it reaching a bigger audience of english readers. The aim of this paper therefore is to let them know the news.

I first came across this “century plant” in October 1983, during a 3 day field trip along the Uxpanapa river, a tributary of the enormous Coatzacoalcos river, in the southern part of Veracruz state. Travelling by boat in the pleasant company of Dr. Alejandro Toledo and Pr Luis Malpica, we came across after several hours of going upstream an impressive canyon carved by the river know locally as “El Encajonado”, with 100 m. high vertical walls of cretaceous limestone. I noticed a rosette-forming plant growing abundantly on the cliffs but it seem unreachable but I somehow found a way to



Habitat of *Agave wendtii*, rio Uxpanapa, Mexico (Photo : M. Cházaro).



Agave wendtii in cultivation, Rancho La Palma, Veracruz, Mexico (Photo : M. Cházaro).



Agave wendtii flowering, Rancho La Palma, Veracruz, Mexico (Photo : P. Hernandez).

climb it using an adventive root of *Ficus* (fig tree) and thereby I was able to reach as far as the lowest population. I kicked at it, bringing some plants down into the water. On close inspection there turned out to be 2 different species, *Pitcairnia tabulaeformis* a rare Bromeliad, and an interesting unknown *Agave*. Since neither flowers nor fruits were present at that particular time I brought back a few plants of *Agave* and potted them up at home (near Xalapa City, Veracruz).

I certainly felt happy with the find because I knew straight away that it could be something new. I had to await patiently for 9 long years but finally the reward came on May 7th, 1991 when the flowers of just one plant opened and I was able to confirm my suspicions. Sure enough it was an undescribed species. The two remaining plants bloomed the next year (in April) so I left them to set fruit and then cut them up on August 31st, 1992, thus sacrificing the plants for the benefit of science, they became the types, for the original description.

Agave wendtii stands in contrast with the rest of the species (ca. 50 spp.) of mexican *Agave* in that it thrives in the tropical rain forest whereas all others are from tropical deciduous forest, coastal dunes, oak forest, oak pine forest, cloud forest, xerophytic scrub, etc. The recorded rainfall in the Uxpanapa region is over 3 000 mm (12 inches) per year ; temperature is high (average 25° C) due to the altitude, (only 80 m. above sea level) (Cházaro, 1986 and 1995).

Dr Wendt informed me by letter (1996), that *Agave wendtii* also grows in the Chimalapas region of Oaxaca state, therefore, my statement that it is endemic to the Uxpanapa region in Veracruz state (Cházaro, 1995) turned out to be incorrect.

From these climatological factors, I would presume that this *Agave* cannot readily withstand frost and dryness ; in temperate countries it should be kept in the greenhouse during the winter.

It is an attractive as well as a convenient plant due to its medium size and lack of spines ; the rosette measures ca. 50-60 m in diameter full size, the leaves are soft but brittle due to the abundance of parenchyma and scanty fibers ; new leaves have a glaucous color turning to green as they mature, the paired yellow flowers are held in a 1 m tall spike, opening in April and May ; August and September being the fruiting season. I do not know what the pollinators might be at the Uxpanapa river, but at home I saw honey bees visiting the flowers.

Agave wendtii belongs to subgenus **Littaea**, group **Polycephala** of Gentry (1982), the closest species is *Agave pendula* Schnitts, also endemic of Veracruz state.

It is certainly a pleasure for me to dedicate this new species in honour of Dr. Thomas L. Wendt, an outstanding botanist and good friend, now curator of the Herbarium TEX (Botany Department, University of Texas-Austin, USA). Right after obtaining a Ph.D. at the Botany Department, University of Texas at Austin, USA he came to Mexico where he worked for the botany branch, Postgraduate school at Chapingo from 1980 until 1986 ; during these 6 years, Tom did a remarkable study of the woody flora of the tropical rain forest in the Uxpanapa region finding many new species, one new genus and produced several new records for the flora of Mexico.

Since no living material was kept, this species is not in cultivation at present time.

Text : M. Cházaro, Photos : M. Cházaro & Patricia Hernandez

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