

Seeking the Elusive *Agave huachuensis*

By DON B. SKINNER

We have known this *Agave* (in our gardens) since 1930. It is the most sought after of the larger *Agaves* for garden work in Southern California. Those in our gardens were first distributed by the Huntington Botanic Gardens; few are to be found in nurseries, and these are high priced. Most of the plants brought from Arizona have been *Agave parryi*. While the type location for *A. huachuensis* is purported to be the Huachuca Mountains of Southern Arizona, on our first trip hunting it, though we were told it grew on the grassy plains of Patagonia, we found it growing only in the streets of Nogales.

On two trips we failed to find it, though we saw plenty of *A. parryi* and *A. palmeri*. So, on our recent trip we arranged with Mr. George Olin, Naturalist of Saguaro National Monument, to go with us (he having driven that country for twenty odd years) so that we might collect seeds and get photographs.

Most of the seedlings we had seen grown in nurseries we considered to be *A. parryi*, not *A. huachuensis*, and had come to the conclusion

that the latter must be a Mexican species, rather than an Arizona one, as even seen growing in Arizona gardens the plant resembled *A. parryi* rather than its variety, *A. huachuensis*.

Being taken to the Arizona habitat by Mr. Olin, we found it to be about half-way between Sonoita and Patagonia, growing on the wide open plains. Here we found only two large colonies, the first growing on the high (almost swampy) grasslands at about 5,000 feet, the second (still in moist ground) a grassy hillside above meadows, at least fifty acres in this group. This section of the country is noted as being one of the moistest spots in the state. At this spot we found some plants similar to the plant we have here in Southern California. We saw very few seedlings, but many mature plants had huge offsets and innumerable stolons. The latter, the size of baseballs, might be as far as six feet from the parent plant. Plants in these colonies ran from beige-green to almost dusty-blue-green, with coarse brown or black marginal hooked teeth.

A. huachuensis while not as large (single



Fig. 56. The author views a colony of *Agave huachucensis*.

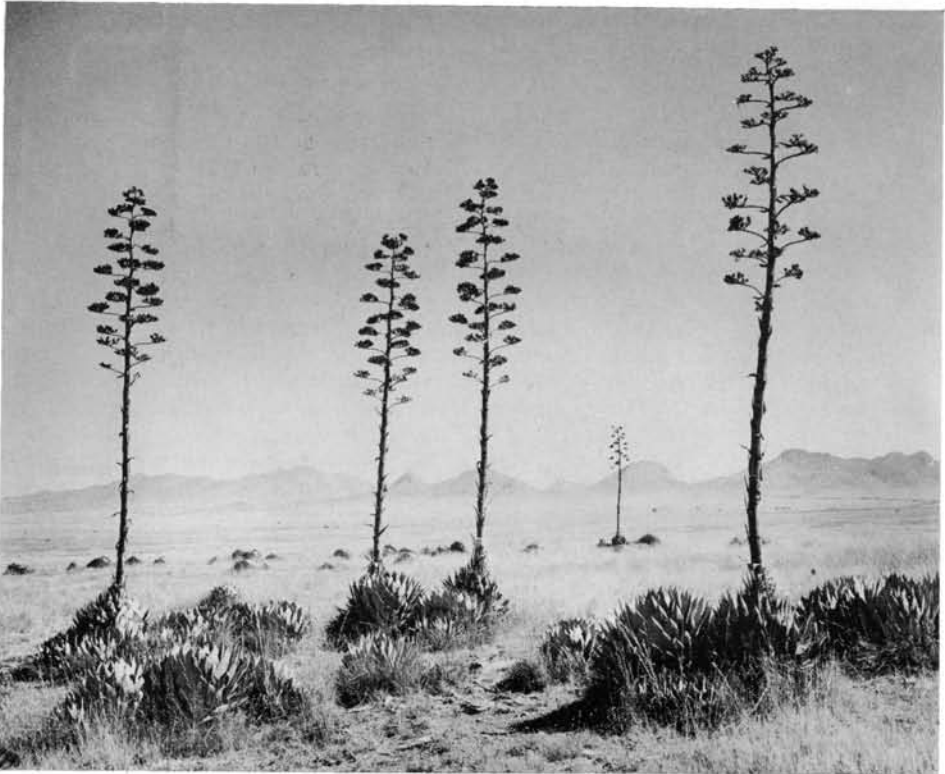


Fig. 57. *Agave huachucensis* on the grassy plains. George Olin photos.

specimens) as *A. palmeri*, grows in immense colonies, and the specimens and flower stalks are by far the most robust of any *we* have seen, native to the states. A characteristic of this Agave is the tight cabbagy head which impresses each cupped leaf firmly on its enclosing mate in a beautiful pattern—a distinctive feature. In our experience *A. huachucensis* tends to have broader leaves, rounder at the tips, the leaves thick at broadest part. Flower stalks run 16-25 feet tall and are exceedingly heavy, with green-yellow flowers, blooming June to August. Fortunately

we found a young offset blooming in December.

Because of the slow rate of growth, this plant will never become too common in gardens. Both locations showed its preference for a moist heavy soil. Seeds are very viable, germinating readily, but, like the parents, seedlings are inconceivably slow-growing.

The accompanying excellent photographs taken by George Olin show the massive clusters, immense flower stalks, and generally fascinating beauty of this Agave.