



Stephen &amp; Kristin Pategas

## in the garden by Stephen and Kristin Pategas

### Agave In Bloom

We waited for this inevitable event for over a decade. Although it is called a century plant, it really takes only about ten years for *Agave americana* to bloom and then – shrivel up and die. A myth claims they bloom after one hundred years. In 2004, Hurricanes Charley, Francis and Jeanne had their way with our house and garden. Hurricane Jeanne toppled an aged laurel oak street tree on our house and created an opportunity to plant something with drama at the curb. But, why stop at one? We planted two, thirty feet apart, and one took the place of the oak.

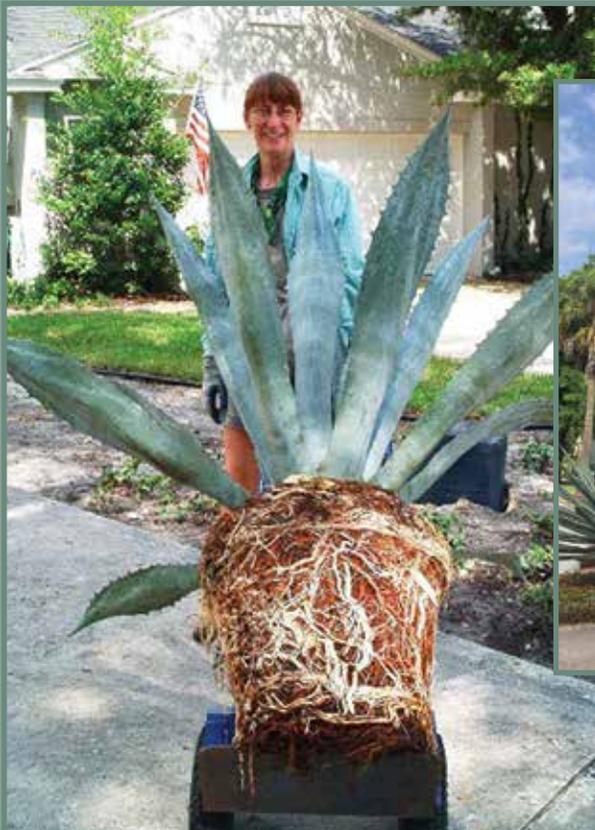
Over the years, the agaves grew to the same eight foot height and twelve foot width creating a dramatic sight whether traversing Berkshire Avenue in Winter Park from the east or west. We swear the long spiny leaves on the one in the right-of-way slowed west-bound traffic coming off of

Orange Avenue. In mid-March we noticed the long anticipated event was beginning. A shaft as thick as a slender thigh was emerging from the middle of each rosette of spiny leaves. As of mid-April the spear-like tips of the emerging flower spikes reached 20 feet above the ground. It should continue to soar over the next few weeks. Then branches will emerge along with yellow flowers. Unlike many other agaves, the flowering is not related to continuing its species. Instead, over its life it generates small replicas within a few feet of its trunk. Unless they are removed you could end up with quite an agave patch. Some agaves don't expire after blooming. Many create spikes and branches with flowers that develop small plantlets that drop to the ground and may root to continue the species.

*Agave americana*, native to Mexico and some Southwestern states in the U.S., has been in Florida so long it is almost considered native. Provide full

sun, well draining soil and plenty of space for this large, visually striking succulent. It is cold hardy to Zone 8b well north of us (Central Florida is Zone 9b). Assume it may get as large as our specimens. The century plant stores water in its leaves and is very drought tolerant. As the plant grows, the older lower leaves wither. We use a Sawzall to cut them away and keep it tidy. Note that the sap may be a skin irritant and the spines on the leaf tips and along the leaves are hazardous. We snip off spines where people or pets may get too close.

So, what happens after the century plants fade and die? It will be time for some serious slice n' dice (Sawzall and long sleeves to the rescue) and then we will replant two century plant pups that were harvested from the originals. It will be time to get the traffic calming devices back in place. We invite you to visit 1425 Berkshire Avenue to see this event in person. Hopefully, when this article reaches you, the flower spikes will be at their prime.



At left, Kristin in 2005 with Agave unpotted and ready for planting near the curb. Above, the dramatic start to the end of the original century plants at Hortus Oasis. Far right, Agave blooming at the Canaveral National Seashore.

All photos by Stephen G. Pategas/Hortus Oasis.