



Agave pablocarrilloi

by Colin C. Walker

Agave pablocarrilloi may be an unfamiliar name to many readers but plants so labelled are probably much better known under the name *Agave gypsophila*. This article aims to explain why.

The great American agave student Howard Scott Gentry described *A. gypsophila* in his ground-breaking monograph of the genus in North America (Gentry, 1982). His species was based on collections from three Mexican states: Colima, Guerrero and

Jalisco. He described it as “a small sprawling plant, easily distinguished by its linear, brittle, brindled, gray leaves with close-set mammillae, small teeth and spines”. The name *gypsophila* meaning “gypsum-loving” was chosen because at its type locality it grew on gypsum rocks, although it also grows on limestone.

Plants labelled as *A. gypsophila* have become quite common in cultivation. The largest plant I’ve ever seen was growing at the Melbourne Botanic Gardens during our visit there in 2010 (Fig. 1). This shows one of the key features of this plant: it offsets readily to form large clumps hence the plant has been easy to propagate from cuttings and has spread widely in collections.

However, more recently, a group of Mexican botanists re-evaluated the status of *A. gypsophila* (Vázquez-García et al., 2013). They proposed a narrow



Fig. 1. *Agave pablocarrilloi* in cultivation at the Melbourne Botanic Gardens in 2010.

concept for *A. gypsophila*, restricting this species to the state Guerrero and described four new species from neighbouring states: *Agave abisaii*, *A. andreae*, *A. kristenii* and *A. pablocarrilloi*. It is now most likely that the plants that are widely grown around the world as *A. gypsophila* no longer belong to this species but are actually *A. pablocarrilloi* as explained below. So a rewrite of labels can be added to your list of 'to do's'!

Agave pablocarrilloi is endemic to the state of Colima, where it is found on limestone outcrops in succulent woodland, thorn forest and tropical dry forest. This new species is similar to the true *A. gypsophila* in its medium-sized rosettes, brittle leaves with undulate margin, rarely cross-zoned leaf patterning and liking for limestone rocks. However, it differs from *A. gypsophila* in its suckering habit, rough, bluish glaucous-grey leaves that are flat on the lower half, close firm teeth and smaller flower

spikes with fewer branches. It is also confined to lower elevations. This species is named in honour of the Mexican botanist Pablo Carrillo-Reyes.

In cultivation *A. pablocarrilloi* can be a little difficult to grow well. Gentry, on what was then known as *A. gypsophila*, said that "the species is sensitive to frost" and noted that it had been killed in cultivation in Arizona and California by low temperatures. In the UK I too found it tricky to grow until it dawned on me that it needs winter warmth so that it can be watered. This species has very thin, barely succulent leaves that can dry up easily or become scarred by small dead patches. Watering throughout the year eliminates this problem although leaf tips still dry up readily. This is not the most handsome of agaves and is more of a novelty than an attractive plant (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 *Agave pablocarrilloi* in a 15cm-diameter pot.



Fig. 3 *Agave pablocarrilloi* 'Ivory Curls'.
Photo: Tina Wardhaugh.

I suspect that the true *A. gypsophila* is currently not in cultivation. Virtually all photos in books and on the internet labelled as this species turn out to be *A. pablocarrilloi*.

Additionally, there is an attractive variegate of this species with cream edges that was formerly known as *A. gypsophila* 'Ivory Curls', but should now be labelled as *A. pablocarrilloi* 'Ivory Curls' (Fig. 3). This variegate apparently originated in Australia where a non-variegated plant flowered and produced variegated bulbils on a flower spike from which it was propagated. This plant, like typical *A. pablocarrilloi*, offsets readily so it is becoming reasonably common in cultivation. It makes a handsome, novel addition to any collection.

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References

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