



NORTHWEST
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Horticulturally Yours
Fortnightly Plant Column from DANIEL SPARLER

MAKING SENSE OF MANGAVES

Being sensible makes sense, but how boring to be relentlessly sensible all the time

—Christopher Lloyd¹

Dear NHS Members and Friends,

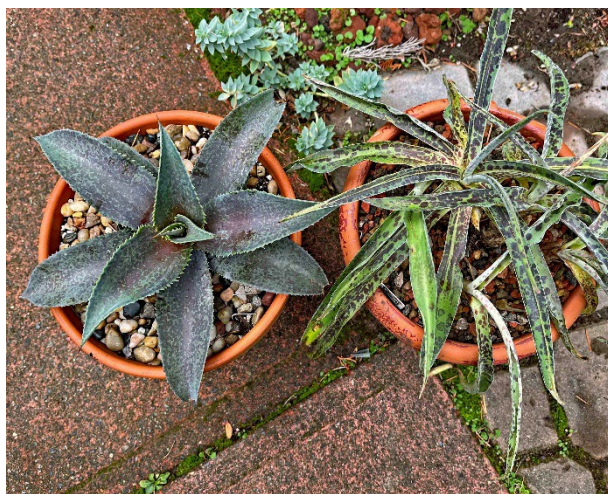


'Snow Leopard' mangave & "cubs"

I've developed a headache trying to come to terms with **mangaves**, which some green thumbs are touting as the succulent of the new millennium. Marketers gush about the eye-catching, color-saturated geometrical symmetry of their fleshy foliage, their rapid growth and their ease of handling: no needle-sharp spikes to contend with. Succulents have many admirers, and I'm right up there among them, as was one of the horticultural titans of the last millennium, Christopher Lloyd. Shortly before his death he wrote, "*Succulents play an important part in the Exotic Garden, having a bold style of their own. 'We are important plants', they tell us and they are right. Their fleshiness gives them a settled, no-nonsense look.*"² His focus was mostly aeoniums, aloes, agaves and cacti. "Christo" may never have laid eyes on a mangave. I wonder what he would have made of them?

What remains unsettled is the muddled, disputed identity of **mangave**³, which has been on the horticultural scene only 20 years. As we'll establish in a moment, those who discovered the first plant and coined its name maintain that mangaves are an intergeneric hybrid of *Manfreda* and *Agave* and as such should be called \times *Mangave*. However, the botanical Powers-That-Be have determined that *Manfreda* is no longer valid as a distinct genus and have folded all former *Manfreda* species into *Agave*. In light of this [taxonomic demotion](#), I'll call these plants mangaves with a lowercase "m", using the term as a common rather than botanical name.

Here's some background to consider as we scratch our collective noggins: **Tony Avent**⁴ (of Plant Delights Nursery in North Carolina) and Carl Schoenfeld (of the late, lamented Yucca Do Nursery near Houston) came up with the term in 2003 for an unusual seedling they considered a hybrid of *Manfreda variegata* (native to Texas) and an *Agave mitis* (aka *A. celsii*, native to Mexico) that appeared seemingly out of the blue at Yucca Do. The next year, Schoenfeld began marketing it as \times Mangave 'Macho Mocha'. A smaller cultivar called '[Bloodspot](#)', reportedly hybridized in Japan from a different manfreda and agave, showed up on the market in California in 2008. In the meantime, Avent and Schoenfeld turned over much of their material to **Hans Hansen**⁵, director of new plant development at [Walters Gardens](#) in Michigan. Over the last few years Hansen has engendered a dazzling series of chromatically gifted plants under the rubric [Mad About Mangave](#)[®].



'Mayan Queen' mangave & 'Chocolate Chip' manfreda

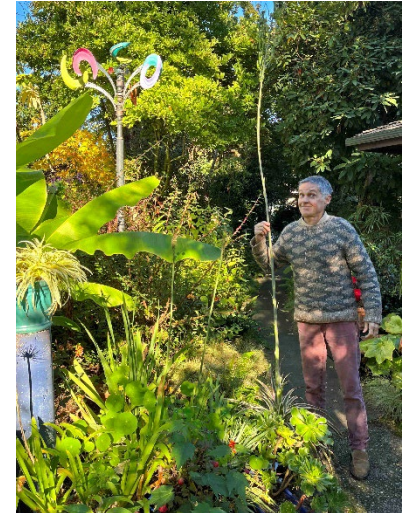


'Silver Fox' bulbils on stalk

Is mangave mania merited? While attempting to manage my expectations, I've grown six mangaves in containers (I haven't dared plant any in the ground), all of which survive, the longest being 'Bloodspot', which after blooming four years ago left behind four healthy pups. The mother died, which adds to my confusion. Mangaves are peddled as polycarpic, meaning they should bloom multiple times before croaking. (The large majority of agaves are monocarpic, with one spectacular but fatal [blaze-of-glory flowering](#).) This spring my mangave 'Silver Fox' bloomed, and again, the mother plant withered away. This time, however, the six-foot blossom stalk yielded more than a dozen plantlets (called [bulbils](#)) that I detached a few weeks ago and have now potted up.

mid-August (on my birthday!) I was startled to see the mother plant forming a peduncle (a blossom stalk) which shot skyward for several weeks, topping out at around 10 feet. The upper portion sports 100 slender, upright 2-inch buds, none of which shows inclinations of opening in the chill November air. I'm at a loss for where to shelter it if a freeze looms.

Lately it's a wild cat that has me crazed: the curiously named '[Snow Leopard](#)' that I bought in February in a 2-gallon liner. By early summer it produced so many offsets that I tipped it out of its container, pulled away half a dozen cubs and potted them up. All the offspring are thriving. In



'Snow Leopard' peduncle Oct. 28



'Navajo Princess' mangave

While many may be mesmerized by mangaves, others maintain a mere "meh". Loree Bohl, author of [Fearless Gardening](#), has tried more than 20 cultivars in her Portland garden, of which only one remains. In 2017 and 2019 she chronicled her initial enthusiasm in her [Danger Garden](#) blog. But in a conversation last week, Loree reflected: "It's been a rather dismal existence for any mangaves unlucky enough to make their way into my hands—only '[Bad Hair Day](#)' survives, somehow. Honestly, I'm over them. I think they're fantastic for folks who live in drier and warmer climes, and especially for people who are deterred by spikes. Or they're great treated as colorful annuals, that *might* live through a mild winter here if given super drainage. I will never be able to think of them as agaves, they're just too fleshy and wimpy! They make great container plants that can be protected in the winter. That's primarily how I'll be growing them in the future."

On that pragmatic note we'll return to the wisdom of Christopher Lloyd: "*Any gardener having a spark in them should enjoy a spirit of adventure from time to time and that is not necessarily sensible. ... [A]lthough there are attendant anxieties, there are also stabs of exhilaration which must not be denied.*" Bravo! Wishing you a joyous —and sensible— Thanksgiving, we'll undeniably meet again in mid-December.

Horticulturally yours,
Daniel

1. From page 15 of *Exotic Planting for Adventurous Gardeners*, by Christopher Lloyd & Friends (Portland: Timber Press, 2007). The UW's Miller Library has a [lending copy](#).
2. From page 93 of the book cited above.
3. Pronounced "man-GAH-vay".
4. Read Avent's 2022 take "[Mesmerizing Mangaves: A Star Is Born](#)" on his Plant Delights website.
5. Read Hansen's 2018 article "[Mad About Mangave](#)" on North American Rock Garden Society's website.