



The Chaparral Yucca (*Hesperoyucca whipplei*)

While hiking one of Dorland's many trails, you will see Chaparral Yucca standing out among a variety of other plants. A monocarpic evergreen, the plant lives between 4 and 8 years, blooms, fruits, and dies. And what an interestingly tragic and beautiful romance it has. Its little lover / buddy, the Yucca Moth, (*Tegeticula maculata*), lives only about a year before crossing the rainbow bridge. Now, before you rush to judgement about the little moth, please fully understand that this moth wants nothing to do with your clothing! Only you (and actual Clothes Moths) consider your best sportcoat to be tasteful.

The Chaparral Yucca moth spends most of its year-long life as a pupa, initially living on the nourishment of a chaparral yucca seed right where it was born, or, more accurately, laid.

Its mother deposited her eggs in the only way any respectable Chaparral Yucca moth would ever think of laying an egg:

First, she met and knew her mate biblically in the blossom of a chaparral yucca and was not overtly interested when he dropped dead shortly after their encounter. And as it came to pass that she was in the family way, she had four days to deliver around 100 eggs. This entailed the following sequence of events: she collected pollen from a blossoming yucca and mashed it into a ball, carried the pollen ball in her mouth as she flew to a blossom on a neighboring chaparral yucca plant, laid one egg in that blossom's ovary-wall and sealed the deal by smearing the ovary-wall above her egg with the big ball of pollen – after completing this for each of her eggs, she died.



One such pollenated ovary will produce fruit containing several hundred seeds which will eventually spring loose from the fruit pod, drop to the ground, and grow into Yucca plants, (if they aren't eaten by creatures first). In the meantime, the moth pupae hatch in about a week and since there are only a few pupae per fruit, there are plenty of extra nutritious seeds for each little pupa to eat. At the end of summer, the pupae drop to the ground and stay inground over winter. They emerge the next spring as moths in search of mates in a Yucca bloom.

This kind of pollination by this type of moth is the only way any Chaparral Yucca plant is ever pollinated - and this type of moth does not exist to do anything else.

Dorland's acreage is home to a variety of flying friends, and though you might see bees, bats, hummingbirds and butterflies visiting a chaparral yucca blossom for its nectar, they do not aid in the pollination of the Chaparral Yucca.

Chaparral Yucca plants are easy to spot growing on the hillsides at Dorland. Their very green, sharp, sword-like leaves grow in a circular bunch up to a 6' radius! When the plant comes to maturity, a tall, narrow, yellow-green stalk will suddenly rise from the center of the leaves (it can appear in as little as 2 weeks) and bloom a mass of white-purplish flowers.

The fruit of the Chaparral Yucca doesn't hang from its stem but rather sits up. Each fruit typically has three seed chambers that split open when the fruit ripens, allowing its seeds to fall from the pods. You might see baby yucca, "pups," growing at the foot of a Yucca...so precious.

All of this because of the tenacity and grit of strong little mother chaparral yucca moths who somehow know how and when and what they have to do. Well done, ladies!



You might notice that some of the Yucca plants and stalks at Dorland appear to be blackened.

When I first visited Dorland last year, I wondered if the blackening was due to the fire that swept through way back in 2004. (And then I decided to do some research and write a little ditty on the Chaparral Yucca for Dorland's Spring Newsletter. Ta Da!) Now back to the blackening... Freezing temperatures, too much rain, fungus, and Yucca bugs are some reasons chaparral yucca can become dark and sickly looking. A lot of the damage is just surface damage and is only aesthetically concerning. Remember, a healthy yucca stalk is only healthy until it blooms. Once the blooms have been pollinated, it fruits and dies, but the tall, dead stalks can remain for years. Obviously, is best to leave the dead intact, as the seed pods might still contain little yucca moth pupae.

These Yucca live happily in the dry, rocky soil of California's southern coastal open-spaces below 5000 feet in elevation where the environment is very hot in the summer with mild temps in the light-rainy winter. They've adapted to survive extreme heat without much water, having thick, fibrous, moisture-saving leaves and a root system that absorbs water quickly; too much water will kill the plant, so it needs to grow in soil that drains well.

These plants know - Dorland Mountain Arts is a great place to grow!

The flowers, stalk, seeds and fruit of the Chaparral Yucca are all edible, and the base of the plant, (the heart), can also be harvested for roasting. In fact, there are YouTube videos that will walk you through the harvesting and preparation of the Chaparral yucca plant.



Be cautious when searching for Yucca recipes though, some are actually recipes for Yuca, the root of the cassava plant, (pronounced: yookah), not Yucca, (pronounced: yuckah). Yucca roots and stalks, though delicious in their own way, are not the same as Yuca roots.

Because the leaves of a Yucca plant are so fibrous, they have been used by human beings to make cloth, rope, fishing line, baskets and foot-wear. The very sharp point of the leaf can be used to punch holes, as a needle. So as much as you'd like to hug a Yucca, maybe don't.

Throughout recorded history, (and, it stands to reason, way before that), the Chaparral Yucca plant has played a vital role in the survival of human beings. Even if you might not wish to include it in your home or pantry, this plant is still a relevant and critical sanctuary and food source for many birds and animals who live in Chaparral biomes like Dorland Mountain.

Chaparral Yucca has many aliases (Lord's Candle, Spanish Sword, Spanish Bayonet, Whipple's Yucca, Quixote Yucca, common yucca, foothill yucca and more...). As far as its family name, experts have not decided, they've tossed this plant from the lily family (Liliaceae) to the agave family (Agavaceae), over to the asparagus family (Asparagaceae)... Meanwhile, no matter what its family name, the Chaparral Yucca continues to be its beautiful self, something that tends to happen to all of us during our stay at Dorland Mountain Arts.