

*Agave missionum* Trel.  
AGAVACEAE

corita

Synonyms: *Agave portoricensis* Trel.



**General Description.**—Corita, also known as maguey, is a succulent shrub with woody parts that is 1.0 to 1.5 m in height in its vegetative stage and 3 to 6 m when in flower. The plant is considered a shrub because it is of shrub size and has fibrous-woody tissue at the base of the leaf whorl, woody thorns, and a woody flower stalk. The numerous fibrous roots are about 5 mm in diameter and the fibrous-woody base of the plant extends about 15 cm below the surface. Lanciolate to broadly lanciolate, fleshy leaves are blue-green in color, contain many fine, high-quality fibers running their length, and thorns, 2 to 6 mm in length along their edges, and larger ones, 10 to 20 mm long, at the tips. The leaves die when the plant is about midway through flowering. The flower stalks (panicles) are about 10 cm in basal diameter with soft wood and a pithy center. The yellow or yellow-green perianth is six-parted and funnel shaped, 4.5 to 5.2 cm long. The capsules are elliptical or globose and 2.5 to 3.8 cm long and

contains numerous seeds, 6 to 8.5 mm long and 5 to 6 mm broad. If the flowers abort, numerous bulbils are formed on the pedicels (author's observation, Britton and Wilson 1923).

**Range.**—Corita is native to Puerto Rico and the offshore islands of Culebra and Vieques and St. Thomas, St. Croix, St. John, Tortola, Virgin Gorda and Anegada in the U.S. and British Virgin Islands (Breckon and García 2001, Britton and Wilson 1923, University of the Virgin Islands Conservation Data Center 2002). Based on work by Trelease (1913), some sources (International Plant Name Index 2002, Missouri Botanical Garden 2002, Texas A & M University Bioinformatics Working Group 2002) separate the group into two species—*A. missionum* and *A. portoricensis* Trel. However, Britton and Wilson (1923) and Liogier and Martorell (2000) recognize just *A. missionum*. Because ecological and management differences between the two populations are probably minor, they will be treated here as a single species.

**Ecology.**—Corita grow naturally in well-drained to excessively drained areas that receive between 750 mm and about 1700 mm of annual precipitation. The species colonizes most soil types over both sedimentary and igneous rock formations. Corita is intolerant of shade and consequently does not grow well under a closed forest canopy and does not compete well in tall grass swards. It is often found in disturbed areas, cliffs, and rocky terrain on the coasts and inland. Corita plants are eaten by cattle when they are small but are generally avoided after the thorns harden.

**Reproduction.**—Flowering of corita appears to be triggered more by size and vigor than by age. Probably, reserves of starch and other nutrients are important. Flowering plants are often about 1 m or more in height (tallest leaf), 2 m in diameter, and 5 to 10 or more years old, depending on the quality of the habitat. Flowering proceeds from the bottom of the inflorescence to the top. Although honeybees and other insects visit the flowers in great numbers, most plants never produce seeds. After the flowers fall off, bulbils form at the point

where the flowers were attached. Corita plants produce several hundred to several thousand bulbils each. A collection of 100 bulbils from Puerto Rico weighed (fresh) an average of  $3.003 \pm 0.252$  g/bulbil and ranged from 0.18 to 13.63 g. Placed with their bases slightly buried in moist potting mix, all of them rooted within 1 week. They grew rapidly under partial shade and were pricked into containers in about 3 weeks from sowing. After 2 or 3 weeks they were moved to full sun and reached about 15 cm in height in 2 additional months and were dispersed to the public (author's observation). Plants originating from bulbils can be numerous under fruiting plants. It is not known what specialized means of dispersal exist. However, new plants are frequently seen with no remains of flowering corita plants nearby. Normally a plant dies after completing flowering, but many plants produce basal sprouts in the year of flowering, or before, that continue for another generation.

**Growth and Management.**—Corita grows at a steady, moderate rate from bulbils on well-watered soil and somewhat more slowly in poor, droughty ground. Growth and development of seedlings has not been reported. Transplanting is easy with little mortality. Because of low competition, disturbed, dry, and rocky areas are probably the best sites for planting. Corita is recommended for planting on shorelines and dunes in the Caribbean (United Nations Environment Program 1998).

**Benefits.**—Corita contributes to the biodiversity and helps protect the soil in the sites where it grows. Because of its hardiness in almost any well-drained soil, moderate size, and pleasing dark blue-green color, the species makes an excellent ornamental. Because exotic agaves were promoted, it was used sparingly in the past but is beginning to attract more attention. Corita appears to be an excellent honey source. The leaves contain strong fibers that probably were used for cordage in former times.

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