Dasylirion – The Shaggy Lilies

Greg Starr

3340 W. Ruthann Road
Tucson, Arizona 85745

The genus Dasylirion is native to the southwestern United States and Mexico. It consists of about 16 species, and is closely related to Beaucarnea and Nolina. The English translation of Dasylirion is Dasy (shaggy) and lirion (lily), in reference to the old leaves that hang on the trunk and give the plant a shaggy appearance. Typically, the plants are described as perennial, although they are evergreen and somewhat shrub-like. They consist of numerous leaves arranged in a rosette on a woody stem which can be arborescent. The leaves of all species (except Dasylirion longissimum) are generally flattened, with prickles along the leaf edge. The flower stalk is 6-15 feet tall, and has many short side branches. Male and female flowers occur on separate plants, so only the female plants will set seed.

Although most species superficially resemble one another, there are some subtle differences that make growing these plants rewarding. The variation in leaf size and color from one species to the next is remarkable. One species has thin, four sided, green leaves with no marginal prickles, another has narrow, green leaves with prickles that mostly point toward the tip, while another will have broader, green leaves with prickles that mostly point toward the trunk. Still others will have leaf colors in various shades of blue or blue-gray. These will also vary in width and prickle type. Some species have leaves with tips that are very frayed and brushy, while others have leaf tips that are hardly frayed. Although it appears that there are only three horticulturally significant types of Dasylirion, gray leaved, green leaved and prickless leaved, there are sufficient distinctions among these species to make developing a collection a satisfying endeavor.

Dasylirion acrotriche  Green Desert Spoon
Description: Dasylirion acrotriche is a large, trunk forming plant that can grow to an overall height of 8 feet (with a 3 foot tall trunk) and have a crown up to 5 feet across. It takes several years for a trunk to develop. The green leaves are about 2.5 feet long and 0.5 inch wide. The edges are adorned with small, curved prickly teeth that will primarily curve toward the tip of the leaf. The leaf tips dry and fray to give a “brush-like” appearance. In fact, the species name is derived from this characteristic (acro = tip and triche = hair). In late spring or early summer, the flower stalk begins to emerge from the middle of the plant. The stalk grows rapidly and can reach 15 feet tall.

Ornamental Features: The symmetrical form, rich green leaf color, and impressive flower stalk combine to make Dasylirion acrotriche a very decorative plant. Its ease of care and tolerance to adverse conditions make it an ideal choice for difficult locations.

Culture/Maintenance: Dasylirion acrotriche is hardy to at least 15° F and probably lower. The growth rate is moderately fast for this type of plant. A plant from a 5 gallon container can reach 5 feet tall (no visible trunk yet) and 5 feet across in five years. It is drought tolerant once established and will grow with only 11 inches of annual rainfall. For faster growth, the plant should be given supplemental water from spring through summer. It should also be given supplemental water if grown in areas that receive less than 11 inches of annual rainfall. As with most other “woody lilies” (Agave species, Nolina species, and Yucca species), Dasylirion acrotriche grows best in a soil that has good drainage. Plant in full sun or reflected sun for best results. As with other Dasylirion species, Green Desert Spoon requires very little maintenance, and is a good choice for low care landscapes.

Identification: Dasylirion acrotriche is easily separated from Dasylirion wheeleri by virtue of the bright green leaves. Dasylirion texanum is another green leaved species however, it is darker green with fewer, yet stouter marginal teeth. Dasylirion longissimum does not have any marginal teeth on the leaves and cannot be confused with D. acrotriche. However, I have seen a very small percentage of D. longissimum with few, weak marginal teeth. These are interesting and may represent a juvenile characteristic or some possible hybridization of plants in the wild.

Landscape Application: Dasylirion acrotriche is an ideal plant to use singly as a large, bold specimen plant, massed for a spectacular display, or mixed with Dasylirion wheeleri to contrast its blue-gray color. Green Desert Spoon can be interplanted with other desert accent plants such as Nolina spp. and Yucca spp. It also blends well with small or medium size shrubs that do not detract from the Dasylirion as the focal point. Some suggested plants would include: Ageratum corymbosum Butterfly Blue™, Asclepias linaria, Dalea capitate Sierra Gold™, Dalea frutescens Sierra Negra™, Gaura lindheimeri, Salvia Greggii, Viguiera deltoidea, and Zexmenia hispida Devil’s River™.

Precautions: Wildlife, particularly javelina and jackrabbits will eat the leaves of Dasylirion acrotriche. The leaf edges have small curved prickly teeth that detach from the leaf readily and can be a nuisance when weeding or handling the plant.

Dasylirion longissimum  Toothless Desert Spoon
Description: Dasylirion longissimum is a large accent plant that can grow to 9 feet tall (trunk and leaves) and have a leaf crown of up to 9 feet across. The thin, flexible leaves are 1/8 inch wide and can be as long as 4 feet. They are four angled and do not have any teeth along the edge. With age, plants will develop dark, almost black trunks to 6 feet or more in height. Each flower stalk can grow to 10-12 feet tall.
Ornamental Features: The large size, smooth edged leaves and nearly black trunk of *Dasylirion longissimum* combine to create an unusual accent that can be used in any zone of a xeriscape.

Culture/Maintenance: Toothless Desert Spoon can be placed in full sun or filtered light. Plants are tolerant of most soils, but seem to grow best in a soil that has good drainage. They will benefit from fertilizing in spring and summer. They are drought tolerant once established, surviving on 11 inches of annual rainfall. They will respond to supplemental water in spring, summer, and early fall. Plants are slow growing and will take several years to develop the characteristic trunk. However, they are attractive even without the trunk. *Dasylirion longissimum* has been grown and tested in Tucson and Phoenix for at least ten years and has withstood overnight lows of 15° F without suffering any damage. Plants do not need to be cut back unless you want to remove the leaves.

Identification: The thin, flexible, toothless leaves set *Dasylirion longissimum* apart from all other species of *Dasylirion*. There are no species of Nolina or Yucca that could be confused with this *Dasylirion* species.

Landscape Application: Toothless Desert Spoon is a dramatic plant when full grown. However, due to its slow growth rate, its landscape applications prior to reaching full size should be considered. Plants do not have any sharp thorns or teeth, so they can be planted near high traffic areas. There should, however, be plenty of room for full development of the leaf crown which can reach 6-9 feet in diameter. Plants blend well with desert plants and other, more traditional “green” plants. They can be used effectively with *Salvia greggii Sierra Linda*™, *Larrea divaricata*, *Cordia parvifolia*, *Dalea capitata Sierra Gold*™, *Dalea frutescens Sierra Negra*™, *Leucophyllum candidum Thunder Cloud*™, *Anisacanthus quadrifidus* var. *wrightii Mexican Flame*™, *Asclepias linaria*, *Dalea capitata Sierra Gold*™, *Dalea frutescens Sierra Negra*™, *Gaura lindheimeri*, and *Poliomintha maditerraea Lavender Spice*™. Plant spring perennials in the same hole as the Desert Spoon to give added color. Plants such as *Baileya*, *Dyssodia*, *Penstemon*, and even bulbs like *Cooperia* and *Zephyranthes* are compatible. Allow plenty of room for this plant to develop fully. Do not plant in high traffic areas or tight spaces.

Precautions: Take care to protect these plants from wildlife, as they will be eaten by a variety of animals including rabbits and javelina. To date, plants have not been susceptible to any insect pests or diseases. The key is to have a soil with good drainage, and to not over-water the plants. In the past, plants were imported from wild populations in Mexico. Now, however, they are being grown from seed and there is no need to dig plants from the wild.

*Dasylirion wheeleri* Desert Spoon

Description: *Dasylirion wheeleri* has narrow, toothed, blue-green leaves that radiate from the apex of the central trunk to form a nearly perfect hemisphere. This accent plant grows to 5 feet or more tall with a spread of up to 6 feet. It will take many years to achieve this size, and the plants usually seen in landscapes are 3-4 feet across. A tall flower spike appears in the summer. The spike of female flowers is larger in diameter than the spike of male flowers.

Ornamental Features: *Dasylirion wheeleri* is one of the most striking accent plants available. The dense rosette of blue-gray leaves and the impressive flowering spike are an unbeatable combination.

Culture/Maintenance: Desert Spoon is hardy to 0° F. It uses very little water once established, surviving on 11 inches of annual rainfall. Desert Spoon has a moderate to slow growth rate which can be speeded up slightly by supplemental summer irrigation. *Dasylirion wheeleri* grows naturally in rocky soils on mountain slopes and hillsides, and should be placed in a soil with good drainage. Desert Spoon develops its best form, a dense rosette, when grown in full sun and not over-watered. It requires almost no maintenance; spent flower spikes can be removed if desired.

Identification: *Dasylirion wheeleri* is readily distinguished from both *D. acrotriche* and *D. longissimum* by the leaves. *D. wheeleri* has blue-gray leaves, while *D. acrotriche* has rich green leaves, and *D. longissimum* has leaves with no marginal teeth.

Landscape Application: Desert Spoon looks good when used with other desert natives. It can be planted singly among perennials and shrubs, or massed for a spectacular effect. It blends well with groundcovers, and small and medium sized shrubs. Some compatible groundcovers and shrubs include: *Anisacanthus quadrifidus* var. *wrightii Mexican Flame*™, *Asclepias linaria*, *Dalea capitata Sierra Gold*™, *Dalea frutescens Sierra Negra*™, *Gaura lindheimeri*, and *Poliomintha maditerraea Lavender Spice*™. Plant spring perennials in the same hole as the Desert Spoon to give added color. Plants such as *Baileya*, *Dyssodia*, *Penstemon*, and even bulbs like *Cooperia* and *Zephyranthes* are compatible. Allow plenty of room for this plant to develop fully. Do not plant in high traffic areas or tight spaces.

Precautions: The leaves of Desert Spoon are sometimes eaten by javelina, even on mature plants! There does not seem to be much that can be done to prevent this. The teeth on the leaf margins are small, but can be devastating. They curve back towards the trunk, allowing you to reach in, but tearing you on the way back out. Wear a long sleeve shirt and heavy gloves when weeding or otherwise working around this plant.
Dasylirion acrotriche in cultivation (photo GS)

Dasylirion acrotriche - A close-up of the brush-like tips from which the species name is derived. (photo GS)

Dasylirion longissimum as a container plant (photo GS)
Dasylirion longissimum in flower (photo GS)

Dasylirion wheeleri in cultivation (photo GS)