

THE NOLINA FAMILY

by Sue Haffner

The Nolina family (Nolinaceae) is a small family of monocotyledonous shrubs and small trees native to the arid and semi-arid regions of the southern United States, Mexico, and Guatemala. It includes these genera: *Nolina*, *Beaucarnea*, *Calibanus*, and *Dasyliirion*. The family is closely related to *Agave*, *Yucca*, and *Hesperaloe*. They have trunks that are generally stout (or “caudiciform”), simple or sparingly branched, with each stem bearing a terminal rosette of crowded leaves. The leaves are long, linear, parallel-veined, with enlarged leaf bases and a number of drought-tolerant adaptations (such as sunken stomata and a thickened cuticle.) The terminal flower stalks are often of considerable size and bear great numbers of flowers. Individual flowers are small and cream to white in color. Members of the Nolina family are dioecious—i.e., individual plants are either ‘male’ or ‘female’.

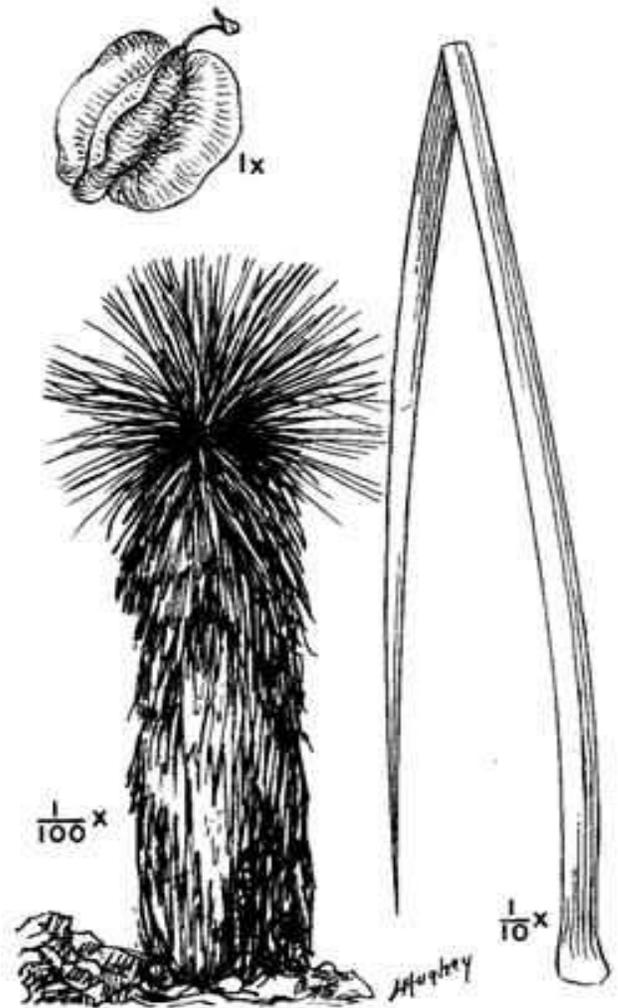
Nolina, the namesake genus of the overall family, is a fairly familiar landscape plant in our area. It includes 10-25 species, depending on which source you consult. They vary from large tree-like forms to bulb-like stemless sub-shrubs. It extends geographically from the southwestern and southeastern U.S. to Oaxaca in southern Mexico. The margins of the leaves in most nolinias are edged with miniature tooth-like prickles, razor-sharp. The flower stalks vary from small simple panicles to large stout compound panicles. The fruits are papery, inflated capsules that usually contain one or two globose seeds.

Six species of *Nolina* occur naturally in southern California and down the Baja California peninsula. *Nolina bigelovii* is a large shrub with unusual filiferous leaf margins found in the higher elevations of the Sonoran Desert, from southeastern California, southern Nevada, western Arizona, northwestern Sonora and the eastern and desert portions of Baja California. *Nolina wolfii* is a large massive shrub found throughout the desert mountains and Peninsular Ranges of southern California. In San Diego County it can be seen in the Pinyon Mountains, where it is locally common, and along the western edge of Anza Borrego Desert State Park and the eastern slopes of the Laguna Mountains. It is easily distinguished from *N. bigelovii* by its razor-sharp leaf margins. *Nolina parryi* occurs in the chaparral of cismontane southern California, from near Ojai in Ventura County to Viejas Mountain in southern San Diego County. A fourth species, *N. interrata*, is a low-growing form that produces large subterranean *Calibanus*-like lignotubers. It is only known from a few small populations in southwestern San Diego County and a small cluster of populations just north of Ensenada, in Baja California. It is listed as an endangered species by the State of California. Two other species of *Nolina* are found only in Baja California. *Nolina palmeri* is a stemless, grass-like species endemic to the higher elevations of the

Sierra Juarez and Sierra San Pedro Martir. *Nolina beldingii* is a tree-like species found in the higher mountains of Baja California Sur. Two poorly-known variants of these two species, *N. palmeri* ssp *brandegeei* and *N. beldingii* ssp *deserticola*, have also been reported from Baja California.

“Beargrass” is one of the common names applied to nolina. Indigenous peoples have used its leaves for such things as thatching, mats, basketry, and hats. The harvesting of nolina leaves for use in the manufacture of brooms is still done in southeastern Arizona, southwestern New Mexico, Sonora and Chihuahua. The sugary pulp of the young, developing inflorescence of some species has been roasted in eaten or fermented into a beverage.

It’s safe to say that all species of *Nolina* will be hardy in our climate. They make excellent landscape plants. Give them a lot of room, as they can develop into robust specimens over time. They can also be planted in large containers.



Beargrass (Nolina bigelovii) USDA Forest Service Collection, Hunt Institute