

Agave 'Kichi-Jokan': An Unsolved Mystery

By Tom Gatz

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Like many agave fanatics, when I see a new or unusual agave at a plant sale, it often ends up going home with me. Over the past few years, among my many purchases were three attractive agave pups, all from different vendors and all with different names: (*Agave isthmensis* from Greg Starr in Tucson; *A.* 'kissygokan' from Woody Minnich in California; and *A.* 'shoji-kojn' from Thomas Parks in Phoenix. Surprisingly, however, when they grew up they all looked exactly the same (*see photo*). This small, bluish, frost-sensitive cultivar makes a head that reaches a little more than a foot across with many leaves packed into a dense rosette, and it makes many offsets. I acquired a fourth pup from a similar, but unlabeled, agave owned by Ken Schutz, director of the DBG. To further confuse the issue, I found a photograph of what appeared to be the same agave in Miles Anderson's 2001 book, *A Gardener's Directory of Cacti and Succulents*, identified as *A. potatorum*. Recently, the Desert Botanical Garden plant shop began selling the same plant from Rancho Soledad Nursery in California labeled "*Agave dwarf potatorum*." I checked with DBG agave horticulturalist Chad Davis, and he showed me several agaves in the DBG collection acquired from Greg Starr labeled *A. isthmensis* that looked like my specimens. I wondered what was going on. A creative plot by nurserymen to sell more agaves? A major mix-up in labeling?

To try to resolve this mystery, I emailed photos of all five agaves (including the photo in Miles' book) to Greg Starr, to Brian Kemble, the agave horticulturist at Ruth Bancroft Garden in Walnut Creek, Calif., and to Kelly Griffin at Rancho Soledad Nursery. Greg Starr agreed that they all appeared to be the same and that none of them were either *A. potatorum* or *A. isthmensis*. Greg said they are all likely something called *A.* 'kichi-jokan,' a plant he originally sold as what he believed to be a form of *A. isthmensis*. However, after visiting one of the localities for *A. isthmensis*, he no longer believes they fit in *A. isthmensis* or *potatorum* and is waiting to see them flower to hopefully figure out what they really are. Check out the Agaves of Oaxaca and look at *A. isthmensis* on Greg's web site <http://www.starr-nursery.com/Starr%20Nursery.htm>. Greg added that, just looking at it vegetatively, *A.* 'kichi-jokan' looks more like *A. parryi* types than *A. potatorum* types. Kelly Griffin leans toward it being closest to *A. potatorum*; perhaps a hybrid.

Brian Kemble agreed with Greg that its specific identification remains unknown and added the following thoughts. He said that a number of agave cultivars have come out of Japan bearing Japanese names, but no one seems to know anything about their origin. He believes that attempts to "shoehorn" this cultivar into *A. potatorum* are incorrect. Brian points out that *A. potatorum* normally does not make many offsets, and it also has larger and more open rosettes with fewer leaves than 'kichi-jokan.' He adds that we really don't know if plants such as 'kichi-jokan' are actually selections from species found in the wild or the result of horticultural hybridizing. Perhaps someone collected seed from a plant that flowered in cultivation, not knowing whether it was self-pollinating or a hybrid, and then grew many seedlings from which an especially compact individual was selected for propagation.

If you have an *A.* 'kichi-jokan' or an agave with a different name that looks like this one and it flowers, let Greg and Brian know so they can hopefully tell us who the parents are of this interesting agave. Thanks to Chad Davis, Mary Irish, Barb Larson, and Gard Roper for reviewing earlier drafts of this article.