

NOT BORING MEDIA

THE PLANT THAT TAKES 80 YEARS TO BLOOM

High-Interest Nonfiction Reading Passage

WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ Reading Passage ✓ Comprehension Questions
- ✓ Answer Key ✓ Teacher Guide

GRADES 4-6 • LEXILE ~750L • DOK LEVELS 1-4

Reading they'll actually do.

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TERMS OF USE

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WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ High-interest nonfiction reading passage (300-400 words)
- ✓ 6 comprehension questions spanning DOK levels 1-4
- ✓ Complete answer key with explanations
- ✓ Teacher guide with standards, pacing, and extensions

Questions or feedback? Leave a review or message us through TPT!

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THE PLANT THAT TAKES 80 YEARS TO BLOOM

In botanical gardens around the world, crowds of excited visitors sometimes gather to witness one of nature's rarest and most spectacular events: the blooming of an agave plant. These remarkable succulents spend decades—sometimes up to 80 years or more—slowly storing energy, then produce a single magnificent flower stalk before dying. It's a once-in-a-lifetime display that some plant enthusiasts wait years to see.

Agave plants are native to the Americas, particularly Mexico and the American Southwest. They're famous for their role in producing tequila and mezcal, but their unusual blooming cycle is equally remarkable. The plants grow slowly year after year, producing thick, fleshy leaves that efficiently store water and nutrients in harsh desert environments. For decades, they accumulate resources without showing any signs of flowering.

Then, when internal conditions are finally right and the plant has stored enough energy, everything changes with dramatic speed. A massive flower stalk suddenly shoots up from the center of the plant, sometimes growing several inches per day. The stalk can reach 30 feet tall in some species—as tall as a three-story building. Branches covered with thousands of flowers attract pollinators from miles around with their sweet nectar.

The spectacular bloom is beautiful but heartbreakingly brief—typically lasting only a few weeks. Then the entire plant dies, having invested all of its accumulated energy into one final, magnificent reproductive effort. Scientists call this reproductive strategy 'semelparity' or 'big bang reproduction.'

Why would evolution favor such an extreme and seemingly wasteful approach? In the harsh, unpredictable desert environments where agaves evolved, resources are scarce and rainfall is unreliable. By patiently storing energy for decades and then producing one massive bloom with thousands of seeds, agaves can maximize their reproductive success in an environment where many smaller attempts might all fail.

Botanical gardens carefully track their agave collections for signs of impending blooms. When a plant shows the telltale signs of beginning its flowering process, it becomes a major event. Visitors line up to photograph the rare display, knowing they might never see the same plant bloom again—because they won't.

Word Count: 342 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: ABC News

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: _____ Date: _____

1 How long can some agave species take to bloom?

- A) 8 years
- B) 18 years
- C) 80 years or more
- D) 800 years

2 What happens to the agave after it blooms?

- A) It blooms again
- B) It dies
- C) It shrinks
- D) It produces fruit

3 What is 'semelparity'?

- A) Growing slowly
- B) Reproducing once then dying
- C) Living forever
- D) Blooming annually

4 Why do agaves store energy for decades?

- A) They're lazy
- B) To produce one massive reproductive event
- C) They can't make flowers
- D) Desert animals eat flowers

5

Why does this strategy make evolutionary sense?

- A) Deserts have no pollinators
- B) In harsh environments, one big effort beats many small ones
- C) Agaves prefer to die
- D) Flowers don't grow in deserts

6

What lesson about patience does the agave offer?

- A) Never wait
- B) Some achievements require accumulation over long timescales
- C) Plants are boring
- D) 80 years is too long

ANSWER KEY

The Plant That Takes 80 Years to Bloom

- 1. C) 80 years or more**

DOK 1 — Recall.

- 2. B) It dies**

DOK 1 — Recall.

- 3. B) Reproducing once then dying**

DOK 2 — Inference.

- 4. B) To produce one massive reproductive event**

DOK 2 — Inference.

- 5. B) In harsh environments, one big effort beats many small ones**

DOK 3 — Analysis.

- 6. B) Some achievements require accumulation over long timescales**

DOK 4 — Extended Thinking.

TEACHER GUIDE

The Plant That Takes 80 Years to Bloom

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.1 — Refer to details and examples in a text
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.4 — Determine meaning of words and phrases
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.8 — Explain how author uses evidence
- C3 Framework — Historical thinking skills

PACING OPTIONS

- Quick Read (10-15 min): Passage + questions 1-4
- Standard (20-25 min): Full passage + all questions
- Deep Dive (35-40 min): Add discussion + extension

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What would it be like to care for a plant that won't bloom in your lifetime?
- The agave's strategy trades quantity for quality of reproduction. Where else do we see this tradeoff?
- Should botanical gardens prioritize plants with dramatic blooming cycles?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Calculate how old you would be when an agave planted today might bloom.
- Research other plants with unusual life cycles and create a comparison chart.
- Design a time capsule project that spans multiple generations.

DIFFERENTIATION

- Struggling: Pre-teach vocabulary, partner reading
- Advanced: Add research, compare to related events
- ELL: Visual supports, pre-teach context

SOURCE

- ABC News / Houston Chronicle