
Spring Wildflowers in the Desert

by: Desert Awareness Committee members

COLOR COMES TO THE SONORAN DESERT

photos: Dave Mills



Colorful Sonoran Desert Wildflowers
(clockwise from top left) Bluedicks or Desert Hyacinth; Desert Marigold; Desert Star;
Globemallow; Golden Linanthus; Goldfields; Owl's Clover

Here is information you can refer to when viewing this spring's¹ abundant wildflower bloom or when you participate in the Desert Awareness Committee's annual Wildflower Walk² in Cave Creek Recreation Area. This article is drawn from reports written by several knowledgeable Committee members over the years, among them Penny Cox and Gladys Nisbet.

As always, our desert emerges from its winter rest, not from a blanket of snow as in the higher elevations but with subtle changes on our desert floor. Once the night temperatures rise above freezing and the sun begins its slow trek northward again, warming on its way, the first early flowers start emerging. For an abundant spring bloom, ample intermittent fall and winter rains must have occurred.

¹ Article written March 2001

² Usually in April; see current complete DAC schedule at http://www.azfcf.org/desert_awareness_schedule.html



One of the first is the delicate blue-dicks, or desert hyacinth, *Dichelostemma capitatum*, even before the blue lupine, reaching for the sun on its slender stalk and poking its blue-violet petals through the protection of the bursage and brittle bush. Blue-dicks grows from a small bulb and its stalk may be as much as two feet high but usually is shorter. The few leaves are long, slender and grass-like. The several flowers occur in a cluster at the tip of the flower stalk. Under the cluster of flowers are several brownish almost paper-like bracts. Since blue-dicks is a member of the Lily family, each flower consists of a tube that divides into six lobes, three narrower than the other three. The Native Americans and early settlers used the bulb for food, but it is not very tasty.

Illustrations by Nan Byrne from the original *A Desert Place* article



Fairy Duster



Desert Marigold



Desert Lupine

Desert marigold, *Baileya multiradiata*, in bloom from March to November, is a favorite and so well-known it hardly needs any description. Its many broad, yellow, three lobed rays and yellow disk flowers on their long leafless stalks stand out beautifully from the gray-green lobed leaves that cloak the hairy lower stems.

Brittlebush, *Encelia farinosa*, is also an early bloomer with each bush a neat mound laden with bright yellow daisy-like flowers on the ends of brittle stalks, so aptly named. Its leaves are gray and flannel-like. Its brittle branches exude a resin used as an incense by the Native Americans.

Following, comes the desert mallow, globe mallow, “sore eye poppy,” *Sphaeralcea ambigua*. The sore-eye name arose because the hairs on the plants are irritating to



the eyes. They are also irritating to the skin of susceptible persons. This species is probably the most common mallow in the foothills area. However, there are many species of mallow that can be recognized by their flowers. Cotton is the most notable member of the mallow family. Okra is an edible mallow. Hibiscus and hollyhock are well known garden mallows. The *Sphaeralcea* species are generally perennials, more or less woody at the base forming small bushes. The hairs of the leaves and stems are stellate or having radiating arms like a star. Both the shape of

Illustrations by Nan Byrne from the original *A Desert Place* article



Bluedicks



Penstemon



Globe Mallow

the leaves and the color of the flowers are variable. The flowers are most often grenadine to peach-red but may be mauve or almost white. They have five petals that are not quite symmetric. The numerous stamens and divided pistil are reddish forming an attractive center for the blossom. The stamens are all united at their bases into a tube surrounding the pistil. This structure is characteristic of all mallows. The local wild hibiscus, *Hibiscus coulteri* is a small sparsely branched shrub with pretty 1- to 1½-inch flowers whose petals are yellow with a large red basal spot.

The next to bloom are Chuparosa, *Justicia californica*, and some rare clumps of flaming red penstemon, *Penstemon barbatus*, found along the banks of the washes as a rule, and then comes the ever delightful Mexican poppy, *Eschscholzia californica*, subspecies *mexicana*, filling the gullies and hillsides with their golden carpeting. Mixed with Coulter's blue lupine, *Lupinus sparsiflorus*, an occasional

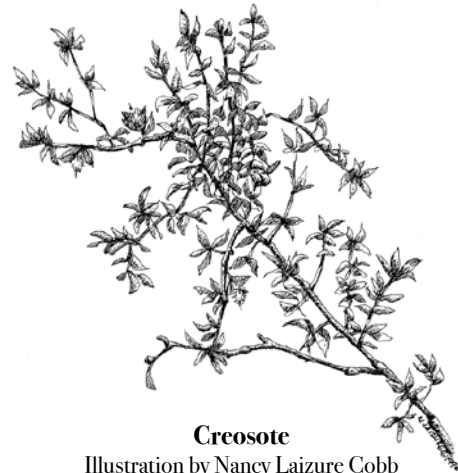


apricot globe mallow and pink fairy duster, *Calliandra eriophylla*, the combination makes a startling and breathtaking view along the roadsides and in the medians.

Paperflower, *Psilostrophe cooperi*, may bloom throughout the year. It is woody at the base and usually several stems are not over one foot high. The stems and leaves are gray-green and covered with matted hairs. The yellow ray flowers are usually five or six in number and 1/2- to 3/4-inch long. The disk flowers are also yellow, but more numerous. The ray flowers remain on the stem and become papery, hence the name.

Desert senna, *Senna covesii*³, are perennials less than two feet tall and woody at the base. The leaves are compound, pinnate with two or three pairs of opposite oval leaflets. Stems, leaflets and the five yellowish sepals are covered with fine, short, white hairs that give a soft velvety feel to the leaves. Desert senna provides only pollen and no nectar to its most important pollinator, the bee, who must learn a special technique of shaking the pollen out of the small pores of the anthers.

The much maligned Creosote bush, *Larrea divaricata*, (also known as Greasewood), comes out with a lovely small yellow flower, nestled against minute white cotton balls. Following rains these shrubs provide the wonderful “fragrance of the desert.”



Creosote
Illustration by Nancy Laizure Cobb

Don't stop yet. “Belly flowers” contribute to the colorful Foothills spring. Many tiny flowers make their appearance and one needs to get down at least on his knees, if not on his belly, to see them. These little jewels of flowers are well worth the effort. Take a magnifying glass along for a most pleasant surprise. Here are some:

Early appearing 1- to 3-inch plants of the genus *Draba*, a member of the mustard family. Leaves lie close to the ground, the leafless flower stalk rises above them. The flowers have four tiny white petals. With that magnifying glass, look at the hairs on the leaves; they look like tiny many-rayed stars.

³ formerly *Cassia covesii*



The Sand pigmyweed, *Tillaea erecta*,⁴ a succulent. The flowers are grouped in minute clusters almost too small to see. At first the plant is green, but as it matures it turns red. Since the plants grow close together, these red patches are very attractive.

Phlox family members. The genus *Gilia* has been divided into several genera, but many wildflower lovers still call them all “gilias” as they have no common names. They are low growing, the stems and narrow leaves usually hairy. Small tubular flowers have five lobes and may be white, different shades of blue, bright yellow, pinkish, or occasionally spotted. Desert gold, *Linanthus aureus*, likes disintegrated granitic soil. *Linanthus bigelovii* has cream-colored flowers streaked with crimson that open in the evening and are fragrant. *Linanthus demissus* has white flowers that may be marked with purple and have such short stalks that they are almost hidden by the leaves. This species is also fragrant.



Gilia inconspicua

Abrams, Illustrated Flora of the Pacific States, Vol. 3, p 469 [public domain]

Two very similar species of *Eriastrum* grow in our area. The plants are from 1 to 3 inches tall and the heads of bright blue to white flowers are surrounded by leafy bracts covered with white cobwebby hairs. The blossoms push through this web of hairs to open their bright blue faces to the sun.



left:

Miniature Woolstar

Eriastrum diffusum

right:

Desert Woolstar

Eriastrum eremicum

Abrams, Illustrated Flora of the Pacific States, Vol. 3, p 436 [public domain]

⁴ Scientific name now: *Crassula comata*



One of the most noticeable flowers of spring is Goldfields, *Lasthenia californica* var. *californica*, a low annual that often covers acres from March to May with bright yellow daisy-type flowers. Woolly daisy, *Eriophyllum lanosum*⁵, is another common dwarf annual. As the name implies, the stems, leaves and flower heads are covered with long, loose woolly hairs. The ray flowers are white or sometimes rosy underneath, and the disk or central flowers are yellow.

Desert star or rock daisy, *Monoptilon bellioides*, is not common but well worth watching for, especially in the hills or along sandy washes. It grows close to the ground and may spread to form small mats. The flowers are large for so small a plant, and the white rays and yellow centers tell us they also belong to the daisy family. To distinguish desert star from woolly daisy, notice that desert star, although somewhat hairy, does not have the profuse woolly hairs of a woolly daisy. Also, desert star usually has around 15 rays; woolly daisy has from five to 10 rays.

Filaree, *Erodium cicutarium*, was introduced from Europe many years ago, probably by the Spaniards. Now it is found throughout Arizona. It is not a belly plant, as one plant may spread out well over a foot in diameter; if crowded, it grows three feet high. It is included here because it may start to bloom when the plant is about an inch high and about the same in width. The leaves are almost fern-like with many lobes, and the flower petals are rose-purple, but remain on the plant only a few hours. Filaree is also called cranesbill because a part of the style remains attached to the seed covering and forms a long beak that becomes twisted as it matures. This beak affords a way to penetrate the earth, thus planting the seed.



Filaree
Erodium cicutarium
Abrams, Illustrated Flora of the
Pacific States, Vol. 3, p 7
[public domain]

⁵ Scientific name now: *Antheropeas lanosum*





White-margin Sandmat

Chamaesyce albomarginata

formerly *Euphorbia albomarginata*

Abrams, Illustrated Flora of the Pacific States, Vol. 3, p 7

[public domain]

Spurge, the genus *Euphorbia*, is represented among our belly plants by two or more common species. These small plants lie close to the ground. In one common species the roundish leaves, which are tiny and in pairs along the stem, do not have any hairs but are smooth, thick and somewhat shiny. The numerous flowers are impossible to describe without a whole new vocabulary; but at the base of what appears to be a white petal, you can see a large swollen

reddish gland. There are four of these surrounding the pistil and several stamen. In other species the flowers may be quite different, but all are strange.

Enjoy!

