

The Weekly Plant

30 Dec 2013

Common names: brittlebush, goldhills, incienso

Scientific name: *Encelia farinosa*¹

TAV location:

You've probably already noticed these in flower along Cmo. Loma Alta between OST and Vail. You can also see them from the car as you near the Saguaro-East entrance on OST (just starting to flower). In the Village, the easiest place to see one is in our driveway. Feel free to drive in and park. There is one at the corner of the Goodman's house and a small one just 6-8 ft in from the road on the Winders' side of the driveway.

Discussion:

I noticed this plant a couple of weeks ago on a drive up I-10. As we neared Phoenix brittlebush was everywhere - on both sides of the road and in the median - large and in full bloom. It was spectacular!

Brittlebush is one tough plant. It prefers west- and south-facing rocky slopes. It is used to revegetate and stabilize disturbed areas after fire, for erosion control, and along highways in Arizona and California. Mowing only temporarily reduces growth. High intensity livestock grazing did not reduce plant density even after three years. It completes strongly with buffelgrass.²

All that and it's even easy to identify. The yellow "aster" flowers are large (1.5") and held well above the foliage on branched stalks. The alternate leaves are a whitish-green that contrast well with the flowers. Each leaf can be up to four inches long and is triangular in shape with no teeth. The leaves are covered with white hairs, a common desert plant adaptation. The hairs reflect sunlight (so the leaf doesn't get as hot) and trap moisture around the leaf, which reduces water loss. Brittlebush grown with ample water will have fewer hairs and appear greener than plants grown in drier conditions (photo lower left).

Brittlebush forms leaves and flowers whenever water relations are favorable. Typically a spring bloomer, it can flower as early as November with good winter rains and warm temperatures. However it can be damaged at temperatures below 28°F and may freeze to the ground at 15°F. Drought can cause the leaves to drop. It's not unusual to see a green, leafy plant in winter and dead-looking stalks in summer when the plant has gone dormant. Cold and drought will keep the plant (and leaves) small; warmth and ample water may result in a plant 4-5 feet in height. Though it needs little water, occasional irrigation during extended dry periods will help the plant retain leaves. If your brittlebush is damaged by cold, wait until growth begins before cutting off the dead stems.

To keep brittlebush looking good you will need to remove the old flower stalks. You can cut them back as flowers fade, which prevents seed production. If you allow the seeds to mature, you can gather them to scatter or just let the seeds spread on their own. Always cut the stalks off at their base, just above a leaf (arrow in photo to right).

¹ The Plant List (Kew Botanic Garden) is the source for the currently accepted name: <http://www.theplantlist.org/>.

² Forest Service publication: <http://tinyurl.com/encfar>.



Left: leaves from two different brittlebushes. The plant from which the leaf on the left was taken grows on natural rainfall only. The leaf on the right was taken from a plant that gets extra water thanks to a nearby downspout. Note the difference in hair density, resulting in a difference in color.

Right: flower stalks from last year's flowers. For the most attractive look in a landscape situation, cut these stalk back after flowering, to just above a leaf.

Photos and text by Mary Welch-Keeseey

