

The Weekly Plant

10 Dec 2013

Common names: chuparosa, beleperone (old scientific name), hummingbird bush

Scientific name: *Justicia californica*¹

TAV location:

There is a large plant in flower on the Villa grounds, at the corner of Vivaldi and Langtry. Another is on the hill dividing Langtry from the Villa parking lot (north end). See if you can find the ones around the community center (one even has a few flowers).

Discussion:

As promised - the other chuparosa.

This week's chuparosa and the last Weekly Plant (*Anisacanthus thurberi* - desert honeysuckle) have several things in common. The flowers of both plants are red-to-orange and tubular. They attract hummingbirds and thus both acquired the common name of chuparosa. They are in the same plant family², with opposite, untoothed leaves. They are both native to the washes of Pima County - chuparosa grows up to about 2500 ft above sea level, desert honeysuckle from 2000 to 5000 ft (hence its appearance in the washes here at AV).

These two plants look completely different, however. Desert honeysuckle grows tall and narrow and develops an arching form; chuparosa becomes a rounded clump and can grow to 6' x 6'. Desert honeysuckle has brown-tan-gray stems; chuparosa has gray-green stems. Additionally, chuparosa drops its leaves in response to frost and to drought and can remain leafless if without irrigation or good rains.

I was very excited when the plants around the Villa flowered. Finally I could ID that plant at the Community Center that never, ever flowered. I was really surprised when I read that chuparosa could become one of the most colorful plants in the desert (see second photo, right³). Really, I think I would have noticed a plant that looks like that!

So why don't our chuparosas ever look like that? I think the flower buds are being pruned off. Chuparosa blooms heavily in the spring and sporadically after that. If you take a close look at the plants that are flowering sporadically now, you will see numerous flower buds, possibly the buds that will open in spring. So, pruning now or in early spring will cut off all those flower buds. Such pruning eliminates the spectacular spring bloom. Instead, we are left with the "sporadically after that" flowering we are seeing now. So, when should you prune? Chuparosa develops a pleasing form all on its own, so pruning should be restricted to removing frost-damaged stems and perhaps lightly thinning the interior of the plant as it ages. All pruning should occur after spring flowering⁴. There's never any need for shearing, let alone frequent shearing. Unfortunately some of the plants around the Community Center are sheared so often that they never have a chance to develop buds, let alone flowers.

Just a bit more about chuparosa: This plant can survive on 10" of rain a year, but will often be leafless. With irrigation it can grow quickly and will retain some of its leaves. Chuparosa can be injured if temperatures fall much below freezing and it may die completely to the ground if temperatures go into the teens. It will regrow from the roots and, though never directly stated, I reason that the heavy spring bloom will be lost for that year (killing the stem with cold is equivalent to killing it by pruning it off). Once established chuparosa needs watering only once or twice a month. Excessive watering will lead to rampant growth and decreased flowering.

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

² They are in the Acanthaceae or Acanthus family. Other members of this family include bear's britches (*Acanthus mollis*), black-eyed Susan vine (*Thunbergia alata*), shrimp plant (*Justicia brandegeana*), wild petunia (*Ruellia* species), and houseplants known as nerve plants (*Fittonia* species). Honeysuckle is not in this family.

³ From Horticulture Unlimited website.

⁴ From *Pruning, Planting & Care*, Eric A. Johnson, 1997



Flower buds; flowers; gray-green stem with leaves Photos and text by Mary Welch-Keesey