

# The Weekly Plant

## 22 February 2016

**Common names:** wolfberry, desert thorn

**Scientific name:** *Lycium* species<sup>1</sup>

**In our Community:** see text below

### Discussion

If you hear a plant described as a “shrub with showy spring flowers” you know they are not talking about wolfberry.

Yes, wolfberries are shrubs, some with the potential to grow to 9+ feet. More typically they are 3-5 feet, with contorted often interweaving branches that may end in a sharp point, great as a barrier plant, not necessarily great as a focal point in a landscape.

Yes, many wolfberry species bloom in the spring, even as early as January, but few have showy flowers (unless you are a bee, of course, then you think they are absolutely fabulous). The flowers are usually less than half an inch long and even when bright purple, are not visible from a distance. The fruit is a bright red and, though small, are often more noticeable, but the quail, doves, and other small animals may quickly strip them from the plant.

The leaves, well, when they are there at all, they are small and just a medium green. The leaves are actually a fairly good ID characteristic once you learn to recognize them, different from the leaves of most other desert plants.



So why am I, and a few others, so intent on adding wolfberries to our landscape? They are great wildlife plants! Pollinators such as bees love them. Butterflies visit as well. Birds eat the berries and use the dense branching as protected nesting sites. Hummingbirds drink from the flowers, one of the few options available to them in January and February.

There are nine species of wolfberry native to Pima County. The most abundant species is *Lycium berlandieri*,<sup>2</sup> with white to pale lavender flowers in July and August, but other times as well. You can see them along the nature trail portion of the orange trail. One, at the north end of the trail, is marked with a sign (start at Raintree and walk toward Cmo. Loma Alta).

There is also one across Galileo from the driveway to lots 13-16. I’ve marked it with a yellow flag.

Currently the most attractive wolfberries in the Village live in the Winder’s yard, between the house and the driveway. These are *Lycium fremontii*, with deep purple flowers. They have been covered with bees for the last month or so. There seems to always be a sparrow or hummingbird perched on their branches.

All wolfberries can survive on natural rainfall once established, though this may mean they are without leaves for several months. Grow them in full sun and provide a monthly watering in summer to prevent complete leaf loss.

<sup>1</sup> Tropicos is the source of the commonly accepted scientific name <sup>2</sup> George Ferguson, UA Herbarium, personal communication



Top right: form of *Lycium berlandieri* on the orange trail, with nature trail sign.

Above left: flower and leaves of *Lycium berlandieri*. Flowers are pale lavender with 5 petals. Other wolfberry species may have 3 or 4 petals. Leaves are oblong, usually widest in the middle or end and there are several leaves clumped together.

Left: form, flower and leaf detail, and flower and fruit detail of *Lycium fremontii*. For comparison, the bee is about 3/4 inch long. The plants are about 5 feet at the highest. These plants have received no irrigation for several years, existing solely on natural rainfall. They often go many months without leaves.