

The Weekly Plant

26 April 2014

Common names: spreading fleabane

Scientific name: *Erigeron divergens*¹ (most likely)

TAV location:

Under palo verdes between tennis court fence and Javelina Way, the two trees furthest away from the community center.

Discussion

I've been trying to write something about this plant for the last couple of weeks. There's just not a lot of information about it, not something truly unique and interesting about it. However, it's a common plant and many people will recognize it as "fleabane" even if they don't know the exact species.

The genus *Erigeron* is very widespread. There are about 390 species worldwide; 173 in North America north of Mexico.

Erigerons are generally known as "fleabane". Bouquets of burning fleabane were used as foggers to rid buildings of fleas and other insect pests (I couldn't find any information on its effectiveness). This appears to have been a European technique, brought to the US by white settlers. A number of Native American tribes used this group of plants medicinally but not as insecticides. The Kiowa considered this plant an omen of good fortune and brought it into their homes.

Fleabanes are most often small, short-lived plants that can pop up anywhere, especially on ground that has been recently disturbed. This last feature is often a characteristic of plants we term "early succession" plants. These plants quickly occupy bare ground. We might think of them as "weeds" because they invade sites intended for other use, such as a farm field or your landscape. However, they are often essential for stabilizing soil, for creating an environment that supports other, more long-lived plants, and for creating habitat for grassland and winter migrant songbirds and other animals.

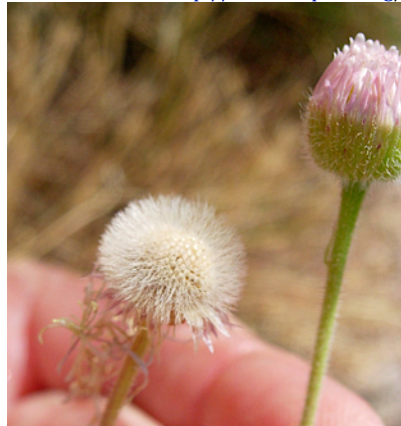
It's fairly easy to recognize fleabanes by their flowers, much more difficult to determine the exact species (hence the wavering on exactly which species we have in the Village). The one I see most frequently is rarely more than 18" tall. It appears to like a bit of soil moisture since I see it around irrigated plants. The upper leaves are long and narrow while the lower leaves are larger (2-3"), more rounded and sometimes have a few teeth or lobes. The flowers of all fleabanes have many long, strap-like petals. It is this characteristic that makes them easy to recognize. The petals are most often pink, white, or purple and our species is all three! If you look at the flowers you'll find nodding flower buds that turn pink and become erect as they open. The open flower (which closes at night) is white with a yellow center and often fades to lilac as it ages. Spreading fleabane and its closest relatives grow as annuals or short-lived perennials.

¹ Tropicos is the source of the currently accepted scientific name: <http://www.tropicos.org/>.



Spreading fleabane has both larger lower leaves with lobes and more slender, linear upper leaves (arrow). The leaves and stems of this plant are hairy (see below also).

Photos and text by Mary Welch-Keesey



Left: nodding buds and open flowers. Center: mature seed head and pink flower bud. *Erigeron* means woolly or early [blooming] old man. Plants with grey and woolly parts often acquire the moniker of "old man". Right: closeup showing individual flowers, strap-like petals.