

The Weekly Plant

26 Feb 2013

Common names: redstem filaree; alfilaria; common cranesbill, heronsbill, or storksbill

Scientific name: *Erodium cicutarium*¹

TAV location:

In road cracks on east side of Galileo opposite lot 168. I have also seen some in road crack on north side of Langry as it curves toward O’Keeffe. You’ll have to look closely to find them.

Discussion:

Finally, the first spring wildling in bloom - and it’s a weed! By now you should know I don’t use the word “weed” lightly. This one is quite lovely and is even good forage, but it’s still a weed. It’s not native to the US. It is found in Europe and the Mediterranean basin, eastward to China and India, and is so widespread that no one quite knows its original native range. It’s naturalized, well, just about everywhere, including throughout the US². It can carpet large areas, out-competing native plants (though I’ve not seen it doing that here, and I’ve seen it in our streets for several years now). It’s on the Colorado Noxious Weeds List.

Redstem filaree is an annual or biennial, probably brought to the US as forage. It is usually found in open, disturbed areas. Indeed ours are hanging out in the cracks along the side the road. In the eastern US we know it as a winter annual. The seeds germinate in fall and a small rosette of leaves develops. Then, as the weather warms in spring, the plant begins to grow and flower. Here in Arizona, it may germinate in spring. No matter, it likes the cooler weather.

The stem of filaree is very short. The leaves are tightly clustered, spreading out to lay almost flat against the ground. This is the structure we call a rosette. The leaf arrangement is known as basal, since we can’t easily tell if the leaves are alternate or opposite. Each leaf is compound, made of several leaflets. Often the flower stalks and the petioles of the leaves will be tinged with red. To my eye, even the edges of the leaflets are red.



A rosette of filaree. The growing point is in the center of the plant.



The flower is simple, with five petals.

The fruit is much more interesting and gives rise to the common names of cranes or heronsbill. It is very elongated so that, to some, it must look like a bird’s bill. This is characteristic of all members of the geranium family (Geraniaceae). The fruit of *Erodium* differs from other members of that family because the “beak” of the fruit is tightly twisted when dry. Add moisture and the beak uncoils. This twisting and untwisting drives the seed into the soil.

¹ The USDA, ARS, National Genetic Resources Program *Germplasm Resources Information Network (GRIN)* Online Database is the source of the currently accepted scientific name.

² Biota of North America Project (<http://www.bonap.org/>).

Above right: the lovely but small flower of redstem filaree. Each flower is less than 1/2” wide. Far left: fruit of filaree. The tip always points upward. Left: mature, dried fruit with twisted “beak” (copied from *Weeds of the Northeast*; Uva, Neal, and DiTomaso; 1997).



Photos and text by Mary Welch-Keesey unless otherwise indicated.