

# The Weekly Plant

## 5 February 2015

**Common names:** London rocket, desert rocket

**Scientific name:** *Sisymbrium irio*<sup>1</sup>

**TAV location:** in the wash between the two town home buildings nearest the tennis court, between lots 230 and 231.

### Discussion

Spring is mustard season everywhere. Many mustards in New England, in the Midwest, in the desert Southwest and in Eurasia grow and bloom in cool, moist spring weather. Few are as distinctive as Sahara mustard or Arizona jewel flower. Even so, it is usually easy to recognize a plant in the mustard family, especially once it flowers.

Mustard is a general term for plants in the Brassicaceae (the mustard family). The genus *Brassica* gives us cabbage, broccoli, kale, and kohlrabi as well as the family name. Thus, the Brassicaceae is also known as the cabbage family.

Some of you may remember a much older name for this family: Cruciferae, meaning cross-bearing, a reference to the flower's 4-petals that frequently resemble a cross (X). Combine 4-petaled flowers with long, slender fruit and low-growing lobbed leaves and you've got the main ID features of the mustard family.

This Week's Plant, London rocket, is a mustard from Eurasia and has every characteristic of a mustard (see photos below, left to right):

- the 4-petaled flowers are small and yellow, X-shaped, held in a cluster at the top of an elongating stalk. Though Brassicaceae can have flowers of any color, yellow flowers are predominate, followed by white.
- the initial leaves are held on a very short stem close to the ground, an arrangement usually referred to as "basal". They are often, but not always, strongly lobed, overall longer than they are wide. The leaves on the flower stalk are smaller and less lobed.



-mustard fruit is usually a silique, a long, slender, dry fruit that splits along two seams when mature. The seeds are attached to a central membrane. If the length of the fruit is less than 2 or 3 times the width, it is called a silicle. Only plants in the Brassicaceae have siliques or silicles.



London rocket came to Arizona in 1909. It is frequently found in disturbed areas (e.g. urban and suburban landscapes, roadsides). It begins to grow and bloom earlier than our native mustards and is one of the first flowers of spring. Final height is 2-3 feet.

Clapham, Warburg, and Tutin in *Flora of the British Isles* claim London rocket got its name from its abundance in disturbed areas after the Great Fire of London in 1666<sup>2</sup>. That explains the "London" but why "rocket"? There are several common names frequently used for plants in the mustard family - rocket, cress, pepperweed, peppergrass. Three of those names refer to the spicy, peppery flavor of the leaves. The derivation of pepperweed and peppergrass is obvious. "Cress" is derived from an Old German word meaning sharp or spicy. "Rocket" comes from the French *roquette*, which is a diminutive of the Latin *eruca*, which designated an unknown plant in the mustard family<sup>2</sup>. Interestingly, the Latin word is retained in *Eruca sativa*, the scientific name for arugula, a salad green with a peppery flavor.

London rocket is a typical mustard. From left: flowers with 4 petals held in an "X"; a young plant showing basal arrangement of lobed leaves; slender siliques mature as new flowers form at the top of the flower stalk; a mature silique split open to show the inner membrane and seeds.

Below, Left: bladderpod mustard has silicles rather than siliques.

Right: petals of AZ jewel flower form an X on top of 4 puffy, showy sepals.



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

<sup>2</sup> from: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eruca\\_sativa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eruca_sativa).