

The Weekly Plant

14 April 2013

Common names: Sonoran prickly poppy, crested pricklepoppy, bluestem pricklepoppy, To:ta Hiosig (Tohono O'odham)
Scientific name: *Argemone gracilentia*¹

TAV location:

There are two plants, both can be seen from Langtry. One plant is on lot 141. The other is on the west side of Langtry next to a yellow and black pole across from lot 144. There is a large patch of prickly poppy along I-10 between Vail and the airport.

Discussion:

This showy plant always attracts attention. It bloomed last year but was cut back before I had a chance to write about it. This is definitely one of those admire-at-a-distance plants. It's really, really sticky.

There are several species of prickly poppy in Arizona and all are similar. They differ in the color of the stems, the color of the sap, the number and location of the prickles, and shape of the leaf. They can be difficult to tell apart because, within a species, there is lots of variation and because you don't want to touch them to tease apart the details. One reference said that several will hybridize. This gives rise to intermediate characteristics and further confuses identification.

Sonoran prickly poppy is 2-3' tall, with several stems. This species is listed as a perennial, but other species may be annuals or short lived perennials. The basal leaves are about 8" long. The stem leaves become much shorter near the flowers. The leaves are lobed, each lobe with a sharp prickle on the end. There may be additional prickles on the midvein and/or on the leaf surface. The stems are sparingly to heavily prickled. Sonoran prickly poppy has green stems with a whitish coating.

The 3-4" flowers, of course, are what you notice. They start as a bud made of 3 prickly sepals. The sepals fall off to reveal 6 paper-like white petals. There are many stamens with yellow anthers surrounding the pistil with a prominent red stigma. The pistil develops into a rounded, prickly (of course) fruit a bit less than 2" long. When mature, the top comes off the fruit to release the seed².

Prickly poppy is in the poppy family (Papaveraceae). One characteristic of this family is colored sap that often contains poisonous alkaloids. Prickly poppies are considered poisonous though they may have been used medicinally by Native Americans. The sap of Sonoran prickly poppy is white, though other prickly poppies may have yellow or orange sap. I didn't pay much attention to this until I found the palm of my hand was stained orange after breaking off a leaf to get the photo in this article (sorry, no photo of the hand!). The other Arizona member of the poppy family you may recognize is the spring wildflower Mexican (California) poppy.

¹ Tropicos (<http://www.tropicos.org/>) is the source of the currently accepted scientific name.
² representative photo: <http://tinyurl.com/swpoppy>

L: flower bud with small leaves. C: flower (petals, stamens, pistil).
R: developing prickly fruit.

Photos and text by Mary Welch-Keesey



Left: prickly stem and leaf.
Above: white sap

