

The Weekly Plant

14 July 2013

Common names: desert zinnia, wild zinnia, spinyleaf zinnia, white or white bush zinnia, *zinia del desierto*
Scientific name: *Zinnia acerosa*¹

TAV location:

Though abundant along most of our trails, there are few desert zinnias near the road. You can see them most easily at the two trailheads on Langtry, just north of its intersection with Galileo. On the east side of Langtry, find the Koffler-Neidhardt bench and sit in the middle. The low, mounded plant several feet in front of you is the zinnia (yellow flag). On the west side of Langtry, a bit further north, find the trail that begins at the end of the wooden fence. Stand by the side of the road and look at the trail. At the top of the rise on the left are several zinnias (pink flag). There aren't very many open flowers yet.



Discussion:

This year I'm fascinated by the changes that have occurred since our heavy rain just over a week ago. The seeds of summer annuals, such as the six-weeks grama described in the last Weekly Plant, are germinating. Some areas look like a newly planted lawn. I have palo verde and what I think are mesquite seedlings popping up everywhere. The perennials along the trails have perked up and some are putting up new leaves and flowers.

What's surprising me is how much better the irrigated landscape plants are starting to look. Why? Is the irrigation watering just a few of the roots, and it took a rain to provide the water the plant really needs? Are the plants responding to the higher humidity? To the slightly cooler days? To the shortening of the days? I don't know.

One plant that has certainly perked up is desert zinnia. I'm seeing new leaves and lots of flower buds. My irrigated plants already have new flowers.

Desert zinnia is listed in some sources as flowering from spring to fall but more honest references suggest flowering in spring and then again in response to the monsoon rains. Complicating the issue is the presence of dried flower petals that seem to hang on and on, turning cream or tan but not falling off.

Weekly Plant is a way for me to learn more about our local plants. I learned I've never looked closely at desert zinnia. Though I knew it was a perennial² (lives 3 years or more), I assumed it was herbaceous (dies to the ground in winter, then



New flower in the center, old flower lower left, and several flower buds (grass in background).

regrows). Wrong! This little native actually becomes woody at the base, like a shrub.

Desert zinnia is in the aster family. The ray flowers have large white petals of variable number (3-7); the disc flowers are yellow. The opposite leaves are about an inch in length, narrow and sharply pointed, but soft to the hand. The plant is usually 6-12" high, spreading to 10" or more. This is truly a plant of the southern Arizona deserts (found also in southern New Mexico, southwestern Texas and into Mexico), surviving and blooming on rainfall alone.

In the landscape, take advantage of this plant's small form and use it for edging or in tight spaces. Like most plants in the aster family, it attracts insects, including tiny butterflies. Though I found no reference to it, I wouldn't be surprised if the goldfinches and sparrows feed on its seeds (I'll be watching!).

¹ Tropicos is the source of the currently accepted scientific name: <http://www.tropicos.org/>. ² The colorful zinnia we know from our childhood is an annual originally from Mexico.



The woody base and lower branches of desert zinnia are characteristic of subshrubs, small plants that become woody at the base.