

# The Weekly Plant

## 2 March 2014

**Common names:** fairy duster, fairyduster (either name with native or pink in front of it), mesquitilla, mock mesquite

**Scientific name:** *Calliandra eriophylla*<sup>1</sup>

### TAV location:

There are several plants on the Villa grounds. Also common along OST.

### Discussion:

Have you ever played with a sensitive mimosa? This small plant reacts to the slightest touch by folding its leaflets. A firmer touch will cause the whole leaf to close and droop<sup>2</sup>. This is an example of thigmonasty, plant movement as a response to touch, caused by a rapid but reversible loss of water in the cells in the leaf. The Fabaceae (pea or legume family) is known for containing plants that exhibit this phenomena.

A related phenomena is nyctinasty, plant movement in response to the onset of darkness. We've all seen flowers close in the evening, reopening with morning light. Somewhat less common are plants with leaves that close at night. Again, the legumes lead the way, including this Week's Plant, fairy duster. The leaves close in response to darkness and also in response to cold (see right).

Our native fairy duster is a small shrub, about 2' x 3' in the wild but larger with irrigation. The compound leaves are small and often evergreen but may drop with extended drought or cold. The fairy dusters in my yard, theoretically growing under identical conditions, ranged from green to leafless this winter.

Fairy duster blooms in late winter/early spring. February blooming is not uncommon; they started blooming in January this year. You may also see a



Fairy duster flower, above. The seed pods, right, curl backward as they open.

second flush of flowers if the monsoon rains are good. The one inch flowers are the "puff ball" type of legume flower, all parts tiny except the elongated, threadlike stamens. The color can range from a deep pink to almost white, natural variation within the species. The flowers attract butterflies, bees, and hummingbirds. The seeds are eaten by quail and small mammals.

I'm planning to collect seeds from my fairy dusters and scatter them on a shallow slope at the back of our lot. Fairy duster is repeatedly listed as one of the best plants for slopes. It has a dense root system that deters soil erosion. It spreads underground, increasing its potential to keep that soil where you want it.

On the Villa grounds you will also find Baja fairy duster (*Calliandra californica*). This native of Baja California, with brilliant red flowers, is larger and more upright than our native fairy duster. It would be a showy substitute for our native except for one problem - the stems can be damaged at 25°F and may die to the ground in a really cold winter, eliminating the spring flower display. However, in a warm winter you will be amply rewarded by this plant. The plants at the Villa have been blooming throughout the winter.

<sup>1</sup> The Plant List (Kew Botanic Garden) is the source for the currently accepted name: <http://www.theplantlist.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> The best video I've found is here: <http://tinyurl.com/cezw85>. Make sure to watch the time-lapse portion starting at about 1:30 minutes. Sensitive mimosa's scientific name is *Mimosa pudica*.

*Baja fairy duster, photos to right*

*Left: Photo taken February 2014. After a warm winter, there are many leaves and flowers. Note the stems that were killed in previous winters. They can be pruned off at ground level.*

*Right: Photo taken in March 2013 after an extremely cold winter. Stems are dead, though the roots are alive.*

*Inset: close-up of dead leaves.*



Photos and text by Mary Welch-Keesey

