The Weekly Plant
3 May 2015

Common names: damianita or damianita daisy, hierba de San Nicolas, false damiana

Scientific name: *Chrysactinia mexicana*

TAV location: in front of Villa, to South of entrance sidewalk. The spring flush of flowers is almost finished. There are several flowers on the plant that is labeled.

Discussion

Though only 18" high, damianita is a show-stopper in late spring when it is covered with bright yellow daisies. Though showiest in spring, this plant may have flowers off and on all summer and into the fall. Damianita stays attractive in winter with dark, evergreen leaves and a pleasant, rounded form. It is tolerant of our summer heat but also quite cold hardy - to 0°F. It seems to be drought tolerant as well. Most references I read suggested watering a few times in summer. The trick to growing this plant in your landscape, however, is a light hand with the pruning shears. Almost every resource I checked noted the plant will die if pruned back too severely. Some light shaping in fall is all it needs.

Damianita is a native of the Chihuahuan Desert, found in Mexico, southern New Mexico, and southwestern Texas. As I was reading about this plant I found several scientific papers describing the isolation of interesting chemicals from this plant.

But why was anyone studying damianita?

In Mexico, damianita is used as a folk remedy for respiratory ailments and skin infections. Some of the chemicals isolated from the plant have both antifungal and antibacterial properties and potential modern medicinal uses.

But why did anyone think to use damianita in folk medicine?

Simply crush a few leaves and take a sniff! That scent is a give-away the plant may be producing some interesting chemical compounds. Peoples all over the world have discovered that scent is an indication of a potentially useful plant -- think chamomile, rosemary, thyme, and the mints.

A close look at the leaves (try holding a leaf up to the sun or use a magnifying glass) will show many small, round indentations. These are the glands that produce the scented chemicals. Many plants have glands. The chemicals produced may attract pollinators or may help limit herbivory by insects and larger animals. To smell chemicals produced in the leaves, it is often necessary to rub the leaves and break open the glands. Experienced botanists may use the scent to help with plant identification. Landscape designers may place pleasantly scented plants near walkways where they will release their aromas when brushed.

PLEASE NOTE: this is not a recommendation for you to start experimenting medicinally with scented plants. Those chemicals are for the plant's benefit, not yours. Some are useful to us, but some are poisonous to us.

[1] Tropicos is the source of the currently accepted scientific name: http://www.tropicos.org/

Photos and text by Mary Welch-Keesey

Top right: plant form. The open center is common in irrigated landscape plants.
Left: flower close-up
Lower right: leaf close-up showing round glands. Each leaf is less than 1/2" and ends in a bristle tip.