

The Weekly Plant

29 April 2012

Common names: red yucca, red hesperaloe
Scientific name: *Hesperaloe parviflora*¹

TAV location:
All around the community center. In many yards.

Discussion:

Red yucca is a popular landscape plant, a monocot native to the Rio Grande area of Texas and adjacent Mexico. Plan on giving this plant plenty of space to grow – its diameter can reach 4 feet (so plant at least 2 ft away from sidewalks and the furthest reaches of other plants). Tall spikes of red flowers appear in late spring, sometimes reaching a height of 8 ft.

Red yucca is the The Weekly Plant because it gives me a chance to talk about the differences between monocotyledonous and dicotyledonous plants (OK, say those long words once – yes, out loud - and forever more you can say monocots and dicots instead). Cotyledons are structures in seeds that store a reserve of energy to power the initial growth of a young seedling. Monocots have one cotyledon; dicots have two. Often, but not always, the first leafy structures you see as a seed germinates are the cotyledons – one if a monocot, two if a dicot. As energy stored in the cotyledons is transferred to the seedling, the cotyledons wither away.

It's easy to tell seedling monocots and dicots apart, but how do you tell mature dicots and monocots apart? The easiest way is to look at the leaves and then the flowers.

The leaves of monocots are almost always long and slender, much longer than they are wide. The veins are parallel to the leaf edges. Grasses, agave, and yucca are monocots. In contrast, the leaves of dicots have veins arranged like the branches on a tree – a central vein that then branches, then the branches branch, and those branches branch.

The parts of monocot flowers come in threes – 3 (or 6 or 9...) sepals, 3 (or 6...) petals, etc. Dicot flowers have parts in 4s or 5s.

Selecting red yucca this week also gives me a chance to talk about aphids. Aphids are insects that feed by piercing the plant with a sharp, slender mouthpart called a stylet, then sucking water and nutrients from the plant. They come in many colors but always have two protuberances, called cornicles, on their back end.



I've seen aphids on red yucca several times, always on the flowers. It's common for certain plant species to get aphids every year and show no ill effects. Strangely, I could find no comments on the impact of aphids on red yucca. I'll monitor the infested plants and see how they react to the aphids. If you have aphids and want to get rid of them, it's easy to do. A strong stream of water will wash them off. You may need to repeat every few days for a week or two. Insecticidal soap (a pesticide) will also kill aphids. Often the best option is just to leave the aphids be. The aphids may be around for only a few weeks. There are also predators that will feed on them – including hummingbirds.

¹ GRIN Online Database is the source of the currently accepted scientific name.

These aphids have black cornicles. You can see the stylet of the uppermost aphid piercing the flower bud.



Note long slender leaf above. Flower has 3 sepals, 3 petals, and 6 stamens.

