

## The Weekly Plant

### 10 August 2014

**Common names:** devil's claw, unicorn plant, doubleclaw, possibly with the adjective "desert" before these names

**Scientific name:** *Proboscidea altheifolia*<sup>1</sup>

**TAV location:** To right of Pake bench, which is across Langtry from the driveway to lots 133-136

#### Discussion

One of our reliable native monsoon wildflowers is the desert devil's claw, a perennial plant that hides below ground most of the year. When the monsoon rains begin, leaves then flowers grow from a tuber-like root. The plant will die back to the ground once the rains end.

The bright yellow flowers are large (2") and lobed with attractive red-orange markings. They stand out among the rather small, circular leaves (2-3"). If the flowers are pollinated (and I know of no second, potentially cross-pollinating plant nearby), the fruit that develops will be long, green, and slender. As the fruit dries, the tip of the fruit cracks open and splits into two curved, sharp-tipped "claws". The claws snag onto the legs of animals and facilitate seed distribution.

Perhaps better known is the similar annual devil's claw, *Proboscidea parviflora*. This plant has pink flowers and leaves as large as your hand. It can grow to 3'x6'.

The Tohono O'odham and other tribes of Arizona found many uses for this annual plant. The young, green fruit was eaten, prepared in the same way as okra. The seeds were also eaten. Most importantly, the claws of the dried fruit provided the black fiber used in Tohono O'odham baskets. Preparing this fiber was no easy task. First the fruit was soaked in water so the fibers could be stripped from the claws. Then the fiber was soaked again to make it pliable enough to use in the baskets. Each fiber was short, never more than about a foot long, so weaving it into baskets was tedious, with many ends to secure. The fiber is tough and often used for the bottom of baskets.

Annual devil's claw is thought to be one of the few plants purposely cultivated by the native peoples of our area, and that only recently, perhaps due to the loss of wild plants. Any time you cultivate a plant, there is the opportunity to "improve" it by planting only seed from plants with the characteristics you want. How would you improve devil's claw? The Tohono O'odham selected for plants with long claws. Their selections have claws up to 12" long compared to the 5" claws of wild plants. They also selected for plants with seeds that germinate quickly.

The Tohono O'odham still weave baskets today. The inner coil of the basket is bear grass (see labeled plant on Villa grounds along Langtry sidewalk), the white is yucca, and the black is devil's claw.

<sup>1</sup> Tropicos is the source of the currently accepted scientific name: <http://www.tropicos.org/>. There is disagreement about the spelling of the second word in the plant name (e.g. althaeifolia).

Below: annual devil's claw is a large plant, up to 3'x6', the leaves are as large as your hand.  
Right: flower



Below: immature fruit of annual devil's claw. The single horn gives rise to the name "unicorn plant".  
Below Right: a tangle of recently harvested devil's claw fruit.



These 4 photos taken at Mission Gardens, a recreation of the Spanish walled garden at San Agustin Mission at the base of A Mountain.



Fruit of annual "devil's claw".  
The seeds are in the pod.