

The Weekly Plant

12 Aug 2012

Names: red spiderling, wine-flower, scarlet spiderling (*Boerhavia coccinea*)¹
 Coulter spiderling (*Boerhavia coulteri*)¹
 windmills, pink three-flower, trailing four o'clock (*Allionia incarnata*)²

TAV location:

Red spiderling and windmills are along the road. Probably most easily sighted on west side of south end of Langtry. Coulter spiderling is rare. Several are growing in the road crack across the street from lots 164-168.

Discussion:

The three plants in this issue of The Weekly Plant have very similar leaves, which is why I noticed them. Many Villagers will remove these plants from their lots, deciding they are weeds (a weed is a plant growing where you do not want it). They are, however, native to our area and to the desert Southwest (the range of Coulter spiderling does not go quite as far into New Mexico and Texas as the others).³

These plants are in the four o'clock family (Nyctaginaceae). I've talked about plant families in the past because, if you recognize the family, you've got a head start on identifying the plant. That's not going to help much here. The flower characteristics, often hidden in very small flowers, may be easily recognized by a botanist, but not by casual enthusiast (like me).

The flowers (sometimes) have bracts that may look like sepals or may even be showy, like petals. Bracts are modified leaves found under the flower or flower cluster. They are often a different shape from the normal plant leaves and sometimes are quite showy (the red of poinsettias and the white of flowering dogwoods are bracts, not sepals or petals). In this family, sepals may resemble petals, showy and colorful. There are no petals at all. It takes a very well-trained eye (and probably a microscope) to ferret out those details and know you have a four o'clock on your hands (other members of this family are the common garden four o'clock and bougainvillea, which has showy bracts).

A vegetative characteristic that might help is the leaves. They are opposite, often with one leaf smaller than the other. This is an unusual characteristic.

Both red spiderling and windmills are prostrate, sending out long, leafy stems close to the ground. Coulter spiderling is upright, with most of the leaves in the lower half of the plant. The flowers are tiny and in clusters.

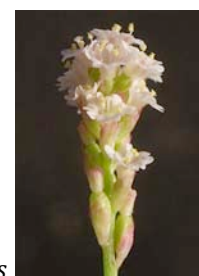
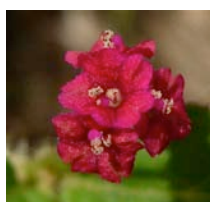
Windmills have the most interesting flower. The bracts are initially closed around the flowers, creating what looks like an unopened flower bud. It encloses 3 flowers that open at the same time. They are so close together they look like a single flower.



Left: form of red spiderling and windmills (windmills shown). Right: form of Coulter spiderling. Note leaves only on lower 1/2.



Left: opposite leaves of unequal size. Right: leaf comparison. To left is red spiderling. Leaf does not lie flat and may have a red edge. Center is windmills with a more rounded leaf. To right is Coulter spiderling, a more linear leaf that may also be edged in red.



Left: red spiderling-cluster 3/8" wide. Two center photos: windmills showing (L) bracts forming a "flower bud" and (R) the three flowers within one apparent flower-up to an inch wide. Right: elongated flower cluster of Coulter spiderling. Flowers range from white to pink-cluster 3/8" wide, 1.25" long.

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

²Flora of North America (<http://floranorthamerica.org/families>) is the source of the currently accepted scientific name.

³From Biota of North America Program North American Plant Atlas. (<http://www.bonap.org/>). Photos and text by Mary Welch-Keesey