

The Weekly Plant

16 March 2014

Common names: locoweed, milkvetch, rattleweed (species with bladderlike fruit), poison-vetch

Scientific name: *Astragalus* spp.¹

TAV location:

The easiest ones to find are at the south end of the base of my mailbox (7904-7934 S. Galileo). Once you've spotted the plant, keep walking south and look at the area next to the curb to see many more.

Discussion

Astragalus is the largest genus of higher plants in the world. It contains about 2,500 species, which is about 1% of the world's flowering plants.² About 2,000 of those species are native to Eurasia. North America claims most of the others (estimated at 400-450 species), with South America providing only about 100 species.

Within the US, only a few *Astragalus* species are widespread. Most are found in only a few states, mostly in the western half of the country. Arizona doesn't come out too badly, with at least 75 *Astragalus* species found within its borders (making it the largest genus of flowering plants in Arizona)³.

All of this is leading up to saying, no, I don't know which species of *Astragalus* we have here in the Village. These plants are all similar and distinguished only by differences in the fruit. I don't have the fruit. I don't have an up-to-date key. Let's just enjoy the whole genus, shall we.

Astragalus has the classic "pea" flower. It's very distinctive and very different from other flowers. The five petals have different shapes and are given their own names. Each flower has one banner (sometimes called the standard), two wings, and a keel made of two fused petals. These petals can be white, pink, red, purple, and mixes of those colors.

Though some of the Eurasian species of *Astragalus* are good forage and others are used in herbal medicine, many of the North American species are poisonous, giving rise to the common names of "locoweed" and "poison-vetch". Horses, cattle, and sheep will eat *Astragalus*, to their detriment. Livestock poisoning by locoweed is the most widespread toxic plant problem in the western US. Some *Astragalus* species produce neurotoxins; others take up selenium, a toxic element. Though a nibble won't cause problems, animals often become habituated to eating *Astragalus*. The animals become "loco" (crazy), stumbling, salivating, and becoming increasingly uncoordinated.⁴

So, admire the pretty flowers, but please, don't nibble.

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

² Calculated from information in Wikipedia article on Fabaceae.

³ *Arizona Flora*, Kearny, Peebles, and collaborators, 1951.

⁴ More details can be found here: <http://www.ansci.cornell.edu/plants/locoweed/astrag1.html>



Photos and text by Mary Welch-Keesey



Left: leaves of *Astragalus* in the Village. The stems are long and hug the ground (see photo at top of page). Center and Right: a different species of *Astragalus*. Photo take in Silver City, NM. Note clumping form and denser leaves.