

The Weekly Plant

18 March 2012

Common names: desert evening primrose, yellow desert primrose, bottle evening primrose, yellow evening primrose, sundrop, yellow sun cups

Scientific name: *Oenothera primiveris*¹

TAV location:

I'm taking a chance that you'll still be able to see this one, and you'll have to work for it. Flowers open in the evening (we saw one at 6:30 PM) and close in the morning, time depends on amount of sun and temperature. You'll find most of them on the OST side of Langtry, on the flat area beside the road. Start at the bench south of lot 77 and go south.

Discussion:

Desert evening primrose is a small annual plant with large, showy yellow flowers, native to the southwestern states (CA, AZ, NM, NV, UT, TX). The books say it can be 4 inches tall. I think ours are closer to 2 inches. The flowers have 4 large petals and are 2 inches wide. Each petal is notched in the center and looks like a heart. My references say the flowers turn pinkish-orange to red as they age. Good luck! I can hardly find the plants when the flowers aren't open. It's going to be even harder when they lose their yellow glow.

The leaves are in a basal rosette (leaves are on a very short stem so they stay close to the ground and spread out from a central point – think dandelion). Each leaf is no more than 4 inches long, making the plant at most about 8 inches wide. The leaves usually have rounded lobes along each edge, but some leaves have no or only a few lobes and on some leaves the lobes become pointed. Sometimes there are red spots on the leaves.

The 4 petals suggest this plant is in the mustard family (see last week's plant), but mustards usually have smaller flowers. This plant is in the evening primrose family (Onagraceae), which is also characterized by 4 petals. The sepals are large and reflexed (turned back toward stem). The top of the pistil is divided into 4 parts, looking like an "X". Any flower with these last two characteristics should suggest the evening primrose family to you.

What does the name "evening primrose" imply? There is little (if any) standardization for plant common names. However, the flowers of a plant called evening primrose usually open in the evening and close in the morning. Other plants in the genus *Oenothera*, with flowers that open during the day, are called "sundrops". If you look at the common names for this plant, you'll find the standardization has gotten a bit loose – I found sundrops, sun cups (also implying flower that open during the day), and just primrose. Desert evening primrose works for me!



Note the heart-shaped petals and the "X" at the end of the pistil (see petal on lower right).



Photo taken at 9AM, flowers already closing. Note reflexed sepals (arrow) and variation in leaf shape.

Photo and text by Mary Welch-Keesey

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