

The Weekly Plant

22April 2012

Common names: skeleton weed, flatcrown buckwheat, flat-top buckwheat

Scientific name: *Eriogonum deflexum*¹

TAV location:

Several very nice specimens on lot 17. It is also scattered along the roadside, middle Langtry on the OST side. May be in your yard, too.

Discussion:

Skeleton weed is easy to overlook because the stems are thin and wiry. The leaves are round and small, with many hairs, held only at the base of the plant. When the weather warms, a slender, leafless, many-branched stalk grows from the center. It is much wider at the top than the base, hence the “flat” in some of the common names. The flowers are tiny, 1-3 mm long, white to light pink, with a reddish center stripe on each tepal. The flowers hang down from the stem, several held together in small clusters. The stalk persists, becoming a “skeleton” as the plant dies.

You may decide, as I did, that you don’t care for the look of this plant and remove it from the landscaped areas of your yard. But if you are desperate to get something to grow, this is the plant for you. It is said to require little water or nitrogen, even little soil.² It is extremely drought-resistant, “flourishing when nearly all other herbaceous plants of the desert have disappeared”.³ And it flowers throughout the year!



Top: plant form. Right: leaves at the base of the plant. Above: pendulous flower clusters.



A flower cluster. In the very center are flowers just starting to open. Two flowers are open at the top of the cluster. Three seeds are developing at the bottom of the cluster. They will turn brown as they mature but will retain three tissue-like wings. Each flower is about 3 mm (~0.1 inch).

Skeleton weed is useful, too. The stems dry to a rusty red/maroon and can be used in flower arrangements. The seeds are an important food source for birds. Bees (those ever-important pollinators) visit its flowers.

If you consider this plant a little too “weedy”, it’s easy to control. Just pull it from the ground. If it has started to flower, make sure you pick it up and throw it in the trash. If it’s flowering, it may be producing seed. If you leave the plants on the ground, you’ll get a new crop next year. Just make sure to leave some skeleton weed in your natural areas for all those birds, bees (butterflies, too), and flower arrangers!

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

² See <http://tinyurl.com/6txyibo>

³ Arizona Flora by T.H. Kearney, et al. 1951