

The Weekly Plant

28 May 2015

Common names: wirelettuce or wire lettuce, desert straw, brownplume wirelettuce, prairie skeletonplant

Scientific name: *Stephanomeria pauciflora*¹

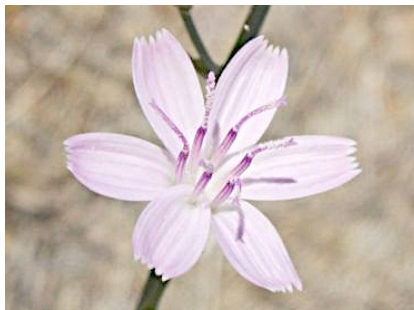
In our Community: on Carver-Eliot, across the street from the northern-most townhome. It is almost finished flowering. I've marked it with an orange flag that will be removed by June 6. You may see the fluffy seed heads on other plants.

Discussion

This delicate little perennial is one of those plants that pops up along our roads - and in our yards - on occasion. The stems are so thin you hardly notice them. The flowers are lovely, but small and usually pale, not out to grab your attention. At less than two feet tall, it grows happily among other plants without overwhelming them. An altogether well-behaved little native.



Wirelettuce is found throughout the southwest quarter of the United States. The “wire” part of the name comes from the thin stems of the plant. The leaves are thin also, tending to drop off as the plant begins to flower. In spring, and sometimes in summer and fall if water is sufficient, wirelettuce will produce pale lavender flowers. These are followed by a fluffy seedhead (think dandelion) typical of many plants in the Aster family.



Ah, the Aster family. The Weekly Plant has featured a number of plants in this family, most with yellow flowers, most with a note about how hard they are to identify. There is a subdivision of this family, however, that is fairly easy to separate from others subdivisions. This is the Chicory tribe (subdivisions of plant families are known as tribes). Instead of dealing with the whole Aster family (2,413 species in 418 genera), you can just look at the single tribe, with only 229 species in 49 genera². That eliminates 90% of the Aster family, a great boon when trying to work out an identification.



What's so different about this tribe? You have to take a close look at the flowers. In typical “daisy” flowers, characteristic of the Aster family, there are small flowers in the center known as disc flowers. These have 5 petals but they are small and rarely noticed. The flowers on the outside of the daisy have three petals fused together, then enlarged, to make what we usually think of as the petals of the daisy (he loves me, he loves me not, he loves me - those petals).

The flowers of plants in the Chicory tribe have all five petals fused together and offset to one side. It looks like one big petal, but if you look closely you can see the 5 teeth at the end of the petal, indicating a fusion of 5. All the flowers in the cluster are the same, so they never look like the typical daisy (there is never a center disc). If you think you have a plant in the Chicory tribe, there is one last test. Break off a leaf. Most plants in this tribe will exude a milky, white sap.



Top: leaf. Center: flower head, note 5 teeth on petals. Bottom: a typical “daisy”. Note 3 lobes on petals.

There are a number of plants native to North America in this tribe, but the most famous members of the tribe are foreign - dandelion belongs here as does chicory and

lettuce. The scientific name for lettuce - *Lactuca* - derives from *lac*, the Latin word for milk, referring to the milky sap produced by these plants. Selective breeding over many years has created our current, domesticated lettuce with hardly any milky sap remaining.³



Top: seeds, with fluff reminiscent of dandelion seeds. Bottom: white sap from broken stem.

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

² Data from Flora of North America Project: http://www.efloras.org/florataxon.aspx?flora_id=1&taxon_id=10074.

³ From Wikipedia article on “Lettuce”.