

# The Weekly Plant

## 29 June 2014

**Common names:** sotol, desert spoon, spoon flower, blue or common sotol

**Scientific name:** *Dasyilirion wheeleri*<sup>1</sup>

**TAV location:** In front of ASA and Community Center

### Discussion

Sotol is one of my favorite plants, but only at a distance. This Rincon Mountain native has leaves with sharp, curved spines along the edges. It is easy to catch your clothes, or your skin, on a spine. Unfortunately, freeing yourself from one spine usually means becoming attached to several others. But if you keep your

distance, you'll see that sotol has a lovely, rounded form, perfect for an accent in the landscape. Even better, it requires very little input from you. Plant it, at a distance from walkways and with enough space to let it spread, then water it for the first two summers. It will survive with very little irrigation from then on.

Sotol in the garden will grow to 6 ft wide and eventually as tall.

As the trunk grows, the leaves will form a shaggy skirt around the trunk. After 7 years or so, the plant may flower. The flower stalk is thick and tall, often greater than 12 ft high. The flowers themselves are small, cream-colored, and dioecious. Dioecious flowers are only male or only female instead having both male and female parts as most flowers do. Each sotol plant is only male or only female. You don't know if it is male or female until the plant flowers. Even then, it can be hard to determine, as the flowers are high on the plant. The easiest way to tell is the eventual presence of dried, 3-winged fruit on the female plants (see photo, bottom left).

The sotol along the sidewalk between the swimming pool and tennis court is a female.

Unlike agave, sotol does not die after it flowers. Each plant will flower every few years for the rest of its life, but not every year. The stalk can be cut off or left on, as you prefer, the only pruning the plant needs. Like agave, the flower stalk is formed from a central growing point at the top of the plant. After flowering, that central point no longer grows. Instead a side branch develops near the top of the plant and continues the plant's upward growth. If you look closely at older specimens, you may be able to see several clusters of leaves growing in slightly different directions, each a side branch. Even with this type of growth, sotol retains its mounding, almost spherical shape and continues to look attractive.

Sotol grows in Arizona and New Mexico. The native peoples of that region found many uses for this plant. The lower part of the stem (the crown) was pit-baked and used as food or fermented into a beverage called sotol. The stalks were eaten as a vegetable - raw or cooked. The leaves were a source of fiber for making baskets and mats. Hardened stalks were used as fence poles and for roofing, even in the head dress of Mescalero Apache Mountain Spirit dancers.

If you are tired of plants that try to slice and dice you, but like the look of sotol, try its close relative, Mexican grass tree<sup>2</sup> (it isn't a tree, it isn't a grass, but it is Mexican). You can find several plants on the Villa grounds. The easiest plant to spot is just past the driveway of Villa staff parking as you walk on the sidewalk to the Community Center. Also

known as toothless spoon, the leaves of this plant have no dangerous teeth. Instead they are thin and angular (rotate your fingers around a leaf to feel the edges and the absence of spines).

Grow Mexican grass tree as you do sotol - in full sun with good drainage. It is a bit less hardy than sotol (to 15°F) but is surviving nicely at the Villa. The dried, shredded leaf tips are characteristic of both sotol and Mexican grass tree, not an indication of underwatering. Flowering is similar to sotol except the flower stalk of Mexican grass tree is shorter (about 9 ft) and thicker.

<sup>1</sup> Tropicos is the source of the currently accepted scientific name: <http://www.tropicos.org/>.  
<sup>2</sup> *Dasyilirion longissimum*, though you may still see it listed as *Dasyilirion quadrangulatum*.



Left, top: sotol leaves, with spines and characteristic shredded tip. Left, bottom: 3-winged fruit. Above: Mexican grass tree on left, sotol on right, behind Villa.