

The Weekly Plant

4 April 2015

Common names: triangleleaf bursage, triangle bursage, triangle bur ragweed, rabbit bush, burrobush

Scientific name: *Ambrosia deltoidea*

TAV location: there are several plants bordering Javelina Way

Discussion

Bursages and ragweeds are both in the genus *Ambrosia*. These plants have several characteristics that help with identification:

- * Plants are inconspicuous and do not have showy flowers.
- * The plants are monoecious, with male flower clusters toward the tip of the flower stalk and female flower clusters at the base.
- * The fruit is a bur, a spiny fruit that clings to the feathers, fur, and clothing of passing animals. Some plants with very spiny burs are named “bursage”. The common name ragweed appears to be a shortening of “ragged weed.” “Ragweeds” do have burs.
- * All species of *Ambrosia* are wind pollinated and produce abundant pollen. This pollen is a major cause of hay fever (one article stated that half of all hay fever reactions were caused by *Ambrosia* pollen).

Mark Dimmitt, in the excellent book “A Natural History of the Sonoran Desert”², states that bursages are crucial species of the Sonoran Desert and that they contribute subliminally to the visual character of the landscape. Triangleleaf bursage, the main *Ambrosia* species in our portion of the Sonoran Desert, is said to grow abundantly among the saguaro and palo verde. I’ve been watching for it on several of my recent hikes and haven’t seen much of it. That makes me wonder if it is more abundant at slightly lower elevations, in Tucson proper and in the Tucson Mountains. It is abundant in Organ Pipe National Monument where it serves as the major nurse plant for tiny saguaro, palo verde, and cactus seedlings.

Triangleleaf bursage grows to a height of about 18”. It has small, whitish leaves with an elongated triangle shape. The plant is evergreen except during severe drought when it will drop some leaves. Bloom period is December through April. This is one tough plant, even though it is often listed as “short-lived” (50 years or so). However, I don’t recommend it for a garden. It is frequently grown to be used in revegetation projects.



If you hike into the lower drainage/canyon areas of the Rincon or Catalina Mountains (including Sabino Canyon and the Saguaro East trails), you may see another of our native ragweeds: *Ambrosia ambrosioides*¹, known as canyon ragweed or giant bursage. Like triangleleaf bursage it also blooms in spring. This plant needs more moisture than triangleleaf bursage to support its almost lush appearance. And yes, it causes hay fever too.

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

² Available in ASA library.



Above: flower stalk of triangleleaf bursage. The upper flower clusters (yellow) are all male flowers. The lower flower clusters (see arrows) are all female flowers and will develop into burs. If you look closely, you can see several yellow styles.

Far left: triangle-shaped leaves of triangleleaf bursage. Left: canyon ragweed. The leaves are a deep green and up to four inches long. The plants can be 3 feet in height and 4 feet wide, with many stems. Flower clusters are to the left and lower center of photo.

