

The Weekly Plant

7 July 2013

Common names: six-weeks grama

Scientific name: *Bouteloua barbata* var. *barbata*¹

TAV location:

Just starting to germinate - probably coming to your yard soon

Discussion:

With the addition of many new plants (and a new irrigation system) to our yard, I've been on the lookout for the wildlings that are sure to appear. When I spotted a low-growing spreading grass, I knew I had to identify it. A number of weedy grasses back East have that form. I have no desire to add crabgrass or similar weeds to my yard.



Left: before flowering, six-weeks grama spreads horizontally, staying close to the ground.



Right: The flowering stalks may reach about a foot above the plant.

Fortunately, by the time I took it in for ID², just a few weeks after the irrigation was turned on, the grass had already started flowering. Mmm, that's a clue! This is probably a summer annual that germinates and quickly produces seed.

The other clue was the shape of the flower cluster. The flowers were closely clustered together on a short stalk. More importantly, they were all on one side of the stalk, bearing a resemblance to a fine comb or, to some eyes, a mosquito larva (a related grass is known as "mosquito grass" because of this). This one-sided flower cluster is a hallmark of the grama grasses, New World grasses in the genus *Bouteloua*.

Though six-weeks grama is widespread throughout the desert Southwest, it's hard to find much information on this grass.³ The seeds need both warm soil and at least 0.6" of rain to germinate, conditions that hopefully occur during the monsoons (and were certainly satisfied by Friday's 1.5" rainfall). It can begin to produce seed in as little as 4 weeks after germination, almost always does so by 6 weeks, and dies in 6-8 weeks. In Arizona, given adequate moisture, you usually find this grass in flower in July, August, and September. The grass is palatable to livestock but has leaves for such a short time that it is not useful as forage. The seeds are eaten by a number of our native songbirds and small mammals. Native summer annual grasses do not contribute to fire hazard in the desert scrub community in which we reside but they can help hold the soil against wind erosion.

Grasses in the genus *Bouteloua* are collectively known as grama grasses. Grama is the Spanish word for grass, which may explain why "grass" is left out of common names for this group, e.g. six-weeks grama (not six-weeks grama grass), blue grama, spruce-top grama). Many grama grasses are native to North America. The perennial species are excellent forage and several species have found their way into ornamental gardens.



The one-sided flower stalks of six-weeks grama. If you look closely, you may see there are two rows of flowers on each flower stalk. Each cluster of flowers is about 3/4" long.

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

² Thanks to volunteers and staff at the UA Herbarium for assistance.

³ The best resource I found is from the USDA Forest Service Fire Effects Information System: <http://www.fs.fed.us/database/feis/index.html>