

The Weekly Plant

4 Aug 2013

A Horticultural Diversion

We are very lucky to live in an area where, with good summer rains, the desert turns into a flower garden. We are doubly lucky that many of these flowers can be grown in home landscapes. Indeed many of them are for sale at local nurseries. We are triply lucky that often we don't have to buy these plants - they just present themselves in the landscape for our approval.

Just because they are free doesn't mean they are worth less. Care for them as landscape plants, as you would plants you purchased, and you too can have a flower garden. These plants can obviously survive on rainfall alone but will look better if given extra water when it is hottest and driest. Here are some suggestions for incorporating the plants into your landscape and improving their appearance:

1. The natives listed on the next few pages can appear anywhere, but you are most likely to find them near irrigated plants and in low areas that collect extra water after rains. From a landscaping/appearance point of view, the plants may not be in the right place. Don't think that every plant that appears in your yard has to stay there. Look at your yard and make realistic decisions. Pay special attention to seedlings (native or not) that have come up in or under your landscape plants (the weed desert broom is notorious for doing this) and remove them before they ruin the look of the landscape plant. You can try digging up misplaced wildflowers and transplanting to a better location. However, I've tried this with desert marigold, bahia, and tiquilia without success. You'll probably have better luck collecting seeds and scattering them where you want the plants to appear.



Desert broom, a weed, (front and right) growing in red yucca (a landscape plant), spoiling the yucca's appearance. Desert broom is a prohibited plant in Academy Village (per CC&Rs) and should be removed from your landscape when found.

2. Use the natives to enhance your landscape. This might include:

- Creating clusters of the same plant, taking out the oddball that doesn't fit (this is a landscape design technique known as massing).
- Enhancing the plant's appearance by adding rocks. You may find the plants growing naturally around rocks and boulders because the soil under the rocks is cooler and possibly moister than the surrounding soil. You'll see this in the open desert, too.
- I don't know how it feels about a vacuum, but in landscape design nature absolutely abhors straight lines. If you find the plants growing in a line because of a curb or other feature, remove a few plants to give the design a natural, curving feel.



Common dogweed among rocks

3. Groom your plants. No one does this to plants growing in the open desert but there is no reason you can't treat the plants in your landscape just like the annuals and perennials you would grow in a flower garden.

- At the beginning of the season, cut back dead plant parts. This will make the plants more compact and more attractive. Throughout the season, remove any sections that have died or broken off.
- Remove spent flowers (a process known as deadheading). See techniques on the next two pages. Be aware, however, that removing spent flowers also removes the plant's ability to form seeds. If you were hoping for seedlings, you will be out of luck. Alternately, wait until the seeds have been released and then cut back the flower stalks.



Simply removing the dead stem would improve this plant's appearance.

- At the end of the season (which I admit can sometimes be hard to pinpoint here in Tucson), cut back plants if needed. Some plants remain attractive into winter (ornamental grasses for example) and some can flower even in the snow.
 - Remove dead plants. Many of our natives can be short-lived. Cut dead plants back to the ground (leaving the roots to hold the soil) and remove the stalks from your yard (or put in your compost pile).
4. Everyone has their own idea of which plants are weeds and you'll probably want to take your weeds out of your yard. The main point I'd like to get across is that you don't have to treat all parts of your yard, or even all of your "weeds" in the same manner. For example, here's what I'm doing in my yard, which has both flat areas and sloped areas:
- I don't like the weedy Euphorbias (Weekly Plant 26 Aug 2012). I'm taking them out wherever I find them. However, on the slopes I'm cutting them off rather than pulling them so I don't disturb the soil and make it more prone to erosion. Unless the plants are very tiny, I'm throwing them in the trash. Our summer annuals, such as these Euphorbias, flower and produce seed very quickly. If I just left them on the ground I might be sowing the seeds for next year's weeds.
 - There are a few coarse grasses whose appearance does not please me. I'm cutting those back all the way to the ground, rather than pulling them, so the roots remain to stabilize the soil. Some of the finer, more attractive grasses are too close to my landscape plants. I'm leaving those fine grasses most places but cutting them back to 2-3" if they are close to my landscape plants. That way, they don't hide the landscape plants but they are there to hold the soil. Plus, I love the tan winter appearance of grasses, like a wonderful carpet, and I'm hoping even the shortened grasses will create this effect.
 - My yard is also divided into a more highly landscaped area with mulch and a more natural area without mulch. I'm pulling out the various 4 o'clocks (see Weekly Plant 12 Aug 2012) that appear in the landscaped area but leaving them in parts of the natural area (again, especially on the slopes).

Our desert natives can be great additions to your yard. Create a flower garden. Let these wildflowers naturalize where they will, then enjoy the change in colors and flowers as the seasons change. Create a focal point. There are lots of choices when you work with these beautiful plants.

What to pick? The native perennials that pop up in yards most regularly are shown on the next few pages. Some have been featured in The Weekly Plant previously and I'll list the issue. Others have not been covered and I reserve the right to do so in the future.

Deadheading How-To

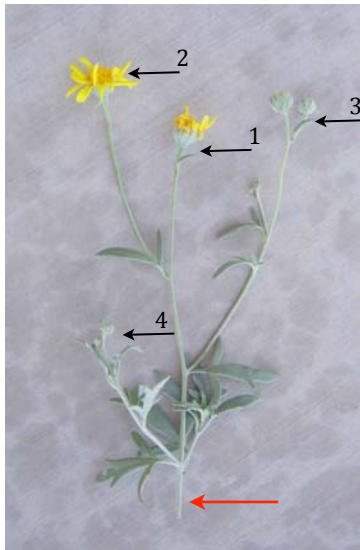
Deadheading is simply the removal of a spent flower. Deadheading can greatly improve the appearance of a plant and may stimulate it to produce more flowers. I've shown several techniques below. You will need to look at the plant to see how the flowers are held, then choose the appropriate technique.

Technique 1: Flower(s) held on an unbranching stalk

After flowers have faded, cut the stalk off at the base but above a leaf if one is present. Do not leave a flowerless stalk sticking up above the leaves. Plants deadheaded this way include: penstemon, desert marigold



Technique 1 (Penstemon)



Technique 2: Flower(s) held on a branching stalk, new flowers form below

This is a time-consuming technique if you have lots of plants. The first flower to form (and thus to fade) is at the top of the stalk. New flowers are formed on side-stalks. If you cut off the whole stalk, as you would in technique 1, you cut off the potential of lots of new flowers. The painstaking option is to cut off the first faded flower back to a leaf, and then the next and then the next. Alternatively, live with a few faded flowers and cut off the whole stalk after all the flowers have faded. Plants deadheaded this way include: desert bahia.

Technique 2: Numbers indicate order in which the flowers open. If you don't want to cut off each individual flower as it fades, cut at the red arrow after flowering has slowed (bahia).

Technique 3: Plant has many, many flowers

Nobody has time to cut off each of these flowers as they fade. Wait until the plant has finished flowering then shear off the spent flowers and some leaves, too. Plants deadheaded this way include: common dogweed



Technique 3: The photos show the same plant. Left: the plant with flowers. Right: the plant with the flowers sheared off and purposefully left on ground in front of plant (common dogweed).

Technique 4: Plant is short-lived and dies back (a), petals stay on plant and are attractive (b), or petals fall and plant is still attractive (c)

These are the best plants - you don't have much to do. (a) Many of our spring wildflowers are annuals that fade as the weather warms. Cut these back when the plants have completely faded and the seeds have been released (jewel flower, lupine). (b) The flowers of both desert zinnia and paper flower dry on the plant and are attractive. There's no need to do anything to the flowers. You can prune the whole plant to a pleasing shape once flowering is finished if desired. (c) Tiquilia flowers are so hidden in the foliage that you hardly know when they are present or when they are gone. It's impossible to deadhead, just appreciate the beautiful foliage.

Common Native Landscape Plants Around Academy Village

Note: Information from my own observations and from *Perennials for the Southwest* by Mary Irish, 2006.

Desert marigold

Baileya multiradiata

Leaves are covered in white hairs. Flowers are yellow daisies held singly. Each flower head has many overlapping petals. Long bloom period. Attracts butterflies. 1.5' x 1'.

Requires excellent drainage and is an excellent accent plant for succulents. Transplant purchased plants in fall or grow from seed. Cut back to a few inches in fall to rejuvenate; deadhead any time (technique 1)



Desert bahia

Bahia absinthifolia

Lobed leaves are a silvery blue and quite noticeable in the landscape, an ornamental feature themselves. Flowers are yellow daisies with a single row of petals. Long bloom period. Attracts butterflies and seed-eating birds. 1' x 1', larger if near irrigation.

Does well without irrigation. Deadhead using technique 2 or cut back by half if looking untidy or just wait and cut back at end of season.

Common dogweed (fetid marigold)

Thymophylla pentachaeta

Very dark green needle-like leaves in a tight mound. Yellow daisy flowers are small and cover the plant. Can bloom almost all year, even in snow. Butterfly nectar and larval plant (dainty sulfur). 4-12" x 6-8".

Easy to grow but short-lived. Make sure to remove dead plants and plant parts. Browns off when weather is dry but greens up quickly with rains. Mass several plants together or plant one or two in a tight space. Deadhead: technique 3.



Spiny goldenweed - Weekly Plant 26 Apr 2013

Xanthisma spinulosum

Small, rounded plant with small, slightly gray leaves and yellow daisies with pointed petals. Blooms spring and again with summer rain. Would expect it to attract butterflies. 1' or less in height, 1' or more in spread

I found no care information for this plant. Observation of it roadside around the Village suggests cutting the plant low after spring flowering will create a more attractive, smaller plant during summer boom. I'd try using that technique at the end of the season also.



Summer bloom of goldenweed

Top: goldenweed that was cut back after spring bloom, note nice, tight form.

Below: goldenweed that was not cut back. Old flowers and some dried leaves visible.



Paper flower - Weekly Plant 7Apr 2013

Psilostrophe cooperi

Very white stems with slender leaves. Yellow flowers have 3-6 lobed petals. The flowers fade to white, almost giving the plant a second season of bloom. Blooms spring, then again with monsoon rains. Attracts butterflies. 1.5' x 2'.

Almost woody plant that needs no irrigation. Shear back in fall to make plant bushier. No deadheading needed, simply shear when flowers no longer attractive (technique 3/4).

Desert zinnia - Weekly Plant 14 July 2013

Zinnia acerosa

Dense plant with short, thin, grayish leaves. Flowers have 3-7 white petals and yellow centers. The petals turn tan to dull white, extending flower interest. Blooms spring and again with monsoon rains. Attracts butterflies. 12" x 10+"

A small woody plant that can lose its leaves in drought. Both leaves and flowers return with rain. Shear after flowers fade, when you no longer like the appearance (techniques 3/4).



Rough menodora - Weekly Plant 5 Aug 2012

Menodora scabra

Erect plant with small leaves and a woody base, probably not evergreen. The yellow flowers fade with the heat of the day. Blooms spring and again with the monsoon rains. 2' x 2' though often smaller.

There is very little information about this plant's cultural needs and I don't have it in my yard (yet). I would suggest cutting back lightly after the seeds have been released (or before, if you don't want more plants) but taking care not to cut into the really woody stems.



Tiqulia, woody crinkle mat - Weekly Plant 22 July 2012

Tiqulia canescens

Low-growing plant with gray leaves and small purple flowers. Grown for foliage and groundcover effect. No more than about 8" high and might spread to 2'.

Another plant with little care information. In my yard needs virtually no care - no deadheading, no cutting back. In June it looks a bit crispy, but plumps out with the summer rains. In the Village, very common on south end of Galileo.

Purple 3-awn - Weekly Plant 2 June 2013

Aristida purpurea

Erect clumping grass that has a purple hue in spring, to 3' if given ample moisture.

Use as an ornamental grass or on a slope to control erosion. Cut back low by late winter/early spring before new growth begins. No deadheading needed.

