

The Weekly Plant

16 Sept 2012

Common names: camphorweed, telegraph plant, broad-leaf goldenaster

Scientific name: *Heterotheca subaxillaris*¹

TAV location:

There is a large clump on Galileo, behind the yellow and black poles across the street from lots 168/165. Also, all along I-10 between Vail and Houghton Rd exits.

Discussion:

Daniel F. Austin, in his book *Baboquivari Mountain Plants*², states that camphorweed “thrives on disturbance”. Indeed, I’ve seen it along roadsides, in ditches, and on vacant lots. However, a hike in Saguaro National Park (Rincon District) on Saturday turned up not one single plant, even along the worn trails. In a well-established desert, these plants do not do well. They are early but temporary settlers that start the process of rehabilitating a damaged land.

Camphorweed is an easy annual to identify, even from a distance. The monsoon rains cause rapid growth. The stems often reach 3 feet, sometimes 5 feet, and the overall look of the plant is coarse. The stem grows straight up but branches at the top, giving the plant a distinctive profile (and common name). I associate this form with plants that flower in late summer. The stem reaches high in the air so the flowers are held up above other plants, easily seen by pollinators.

The leaves are alternate, rough to the touch, and highly scented. Most references say they smell like camphor; one said they smell like creosote. I just think they don’t smell very good. Leaf shape is variable, with the largest leaves almost 3 inches long. Most of the leaves have no leaf stalk. A few low on the stem may have a leaf stalk but then will also have ear-like basal lobes. Those high on the stem near the flowers are reduced in size. Some plants have leaves with few if any teeth on the edge. Others have toothed leaves, with the teeth pointing toward the leaf tip.

Many plants, especially those we use as culinary herbs, have scented leaves. Aromatic oils produced by the plant are held in glands on the surface of the leaves (sometimes on the stems). To break open the glands and release the scent, simply rub the leaf between your fingers.

The flowers of camphorweed are “daisies”. Yes, this is another NYC, that is, a yellow-flowered member of the aster family. The term “daisy” usually refers to a flower head that has flowers with long petals around the perimeter of the head and tiny flowers in the center (think sunflower). The flowers with the long petals are called ray flowers. The small, central flowers are called disk flowers.

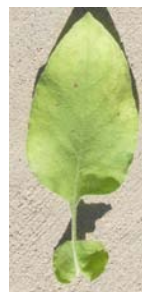
If you cut open the flower head of camphorweed, it is easy to see the individual flowers. You will also see what appears to be three layers. The top layer is the yellow petals and the bristle-like sepals. These bristles will remain attached to the seed to aid dispersal. The next layer is the ovary of the flowers. Last is the receptacle, to which all flowers are attached. If you’ve ever removed all the seeds from the head of a giant sunflower, what you had left was the receptacle.

¹ Flora of North America (<http://floranorthamerica.org/families>) is the source of the currently accepted scientific name.

² see <http://tinyurl.com/Baboquivari>



Plant form. Branching occurs mainly at the top of the plant.



Far above left: toothed leaf from upper stem. Above left: leaf from lower stem. Note leaf stalk and ear-like lobes. Right: oil glands on stem.

Below (L to R): “daisy” flower; cut head with petals & sepals, ovary/developing seeds (arrow), and receptacle; ray and disk flowers.

