

The Weekly Plant

20 Sept 2015

Common names: desert lavender

Scientific name: *Condea emoryi*¹ (formerly *Hyptis emoryi*)

In our Community: there are several around the Community Center - in front of blue lizard and along sidewalk between center and swimming pool

Discussion

The reference books (and websites) loudly proclaim: One inch purple flowers, scented of lavender!

Uhh - no.

How about: one inch clusters of small, 1/4" flowers, only a few open at a time. You will be hard pressed to even notice when it is in flower. The flowers are very lightly and pleasantly scented, but perhaps not of lavender.

Desert lavender is a tough, desert-adapted shrub native to the Mojave and Sonoran Deserts in Arizona, Nevada,



California, and Mexico. It more suited to natural areas than to ornamental landscapes. Once established, it can exist on rainfall, appreciating a bit of extra water only between the end of spring and the beginning of the monsoon rains. Truthful books and websites will suggest that it not be irrigated, as excess water makes the plant tall and lanky.

What does make this plant interesting are the almost-white, always-present leaves. They are roughly triangular in shape and covered with white hairs. This makes a nice contrast to plants with darker leaves - creosote for example - and adds interest to the landscape. The leaves are scented and can perfume the air when brushed. However, if I had a choice of white-to-grey leaved plants with purple flowers, I'd go for Texas ranger over desert lavender, even though desert lavender attracts bees and small butterflies. Texas ranger has a more pleasing form and really showy flowers.

Several references I trust state that desert lavender has a pleasing, compact form and rarely needs pruning - if it is not irrigated. Excess water will push the plant to 10 ft or more in height. Given such a plant and a need to reduce its size, what should you do?

One option is rejuvenation pruning - cut the whole thing to the ground in late winter before new growth begins. Desert lavender should regrow from the roots. After growth begins, thin out crowded stems (again to the ground) if needed. It may take a year or two for the plant to begin flowering.

It's tempting - and easier - to trim all the stems to a height of 12-18". This is how the desert lavender around the community center was maintained for many years. If you take a close look, you'll see lots of dead 18" stems at the base of the plants. Not the most attractive look.



Another pruning option is to cut out only a few stems each year (again to the ground). If you consistently take out the thickest, oldest stems you'll also control the shrub's height - the oldest stems are also the tallest. This method works well for all shrubs that continually produce new stems from the base.

Take a moment to visit the desert lavender next time you are at the Community Center. Rub a leaf between your fingers to enjoy its pleasant scent and see if you can smell the flowers.

¹ A [2012 Phytotaxa paper](#) is the source of the currently accepted scientific name.

Top right: Desert lavender flowers, much enlarged
Top left: Flowers circle the stem at the base of the leaves, but only a few are open at a time.

Bottom left: Desert lavender form. The lanky, open form is typical of irrigated plants.

Right: leaves, showing hairs. Hairs also visible in flower close-up, top right.

