

The Weekly Plant

28 Oct 2012

Common names: Arizona cottontop, Arizona cottongrass, California cottontop, zacata punta blanca

Scientific name: *Digitaria californica*^{1,2}

TAV location:

I have found it in only one location. Take the connector trail that starts just south of lot 215 on Vivaldi. When you reach the Y intersection (marked by pile of rocks, one painted blue), bear right. The trail will turn left, then right. In front of you, a few feet along just as the trail turns left again, are several Arizona cottontops.

Discussion:

I will admit two things up front - I love grasses and can identify only a very few of the grasses native to my Arizona home. Take home: don't ask me to identify your grasses!



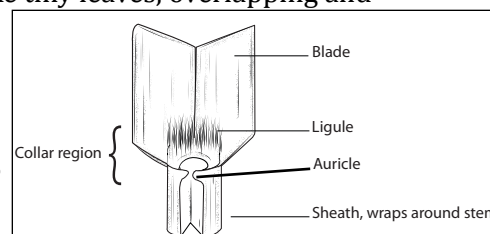
Three clusters of grass flowers, several flowers in each cluster. This is sideoats grama.

You are very lucky if you find a grass actually in flower. Most often we notice grasses before they flower, when only leaves are apparent, or after flowering, as the seeds start to mature. Not that the flower would help much. The distinctive sepals and petals that aid in "wildflower" identification are nowhere to be found. Instead you have small structures that look like tiny leaves, overlapping and nesting within each other. They all look alike, especially to my eye. They are almost impossible to separate and characterize without a dissecting microscope or a good hand lens.

As a result, grass identification starts with the leaves, stems, and plant growth form. The weed guys and the turf guys (these are technical horticultural terms) are really good at this. Think about it. It's important to identify a weed when it's small and before it flowers so you can control it more easily. Lawns (=turf) don't flower because they are mown regular.

Right now, many grasses are brown and dried. If you can find one that is still green, look at the leaves. Gently pull one away from the stem. You will see there are two parts. The blade is the part you held to pull the leaf away from the stem. It is long and slender - what we normally think of when we hear the word "leaf". The part that pulled away from the stem is the sheath and it is part of the leaf also. Important characteristics are how the sheath wraps around the stem; presence, absence and location of hairs; and shape and "feel" of the blade.

The transition area between the blade and the sheath - called the collar - is also important. The leaf of Arizona cottontop has a ligule but no auricles. Auricles wrap around the stem. Ligules lie flat against the stem on the same side as the blade. When you pull the blade away from the stem, you will see the ligule rising above the collar region. Ligules vary greatly between grasses and many grasses do not have ligules. Ligules are most easily seen on new growth.



Top: diagram of grass leaf (IN MG manual). Bottom: leaf of AZ cottontop, ligule marked with arrow.

So what about Arizona cottontop? It is native to Arizona and surrounding desert regions, to southern Colorado, Oklahoma, even into South America³. Cottontop is a perennial, warm-season (grows best in late spring and summer rather than in early spring or in fall), bunch grass. This bunching, non-spreading growth form makes it a good choice as an ornamental grass. It can grow to 4 ft in flower but is often shorter.

Cottontop is good forage and wildlife cover. Like all grasses it helps hold the soil against erosion. Arizona cottontop is easily identified by its seed head. There are several "fingers" (hence *Digitaria*) covered with seeds. The seed is surrounded by long, white to purple, silky hairs that are the cotton in the cottontop.

¹ Flora of North America (<http://floranorthamerica.org/families>) is the source of the currently accepted scientific name. ² Other *Digitaria* species are known as crabgrass. ³ *californica* in the common name refers to Baha California not the state of California. Some references say it is native to southeast California, others state it is not.

