

## The Weekly Plant

### 2 Sept 2012

**Common names:** desert willow, flowering willow, willowleaf catalpa, desert catalpa, bow willow, mimbre  
**Scientific name:** *Chilopsis linearis*<sup>1</sup>

**TAV location:**

A landscape plant used by many around the Village.

**Discussion:**

Common names can be misleading. Take the case of desert willow. It doesn't prefer lots and lots of water (like a true willow). It's not weak-wooded (like a true willow). It doesn't have small flowers in catkins (for example, like a pussy willow). So why is this plant a "willow"?

Two reasons, I think. First, desert willow, a native of the Mojave, Sonoran, and Chihuahuan Deserts, does grow along washes. It prefers more water than natives such as creosote and saguaro. Second, the leaves are long and slender, similar to those of most true willows.

Why do I keep saying "true willow"? Though the common name of a plant can be anything you want, there are some well-accepted conventions. One of those is to call plants in the genus *Salix* by the common name of "willow". Plants in the genus *Salix* have many similar characteristics (see above) and using the name "willow" quickly communicates these.

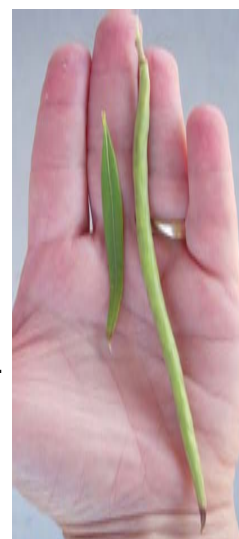
Our desert willow is not a true willow nor related to them. It is closely related to catalpa and trumpet creeper of the Eastern US (it is in the Bignoniaceae or *Bignonia* family). The flowers are large and showy, trumpet shaped. They are especially attractive to hummingbirds and bees. From each flower a large, slender seed pod is produced. These will split in two to release seeds. The pods stay on the plant and can be easily seen after the leaves have fallen in autumn. Desert willow wood is strong and was used to make bows and cradleboards.

This tree provides food for a very large moth caterpillar - the rustic sphinx moth caterpillar<sup>2</sup>. This is also a "hornworm", closely related to the tobacco and tomato hornworms. It is larger (up to 6" in length and 3/4" diameter), with rougher skin and both purple and white stripes. Unlike tobacco and tomato hornworms, which feed on plants in the nightshade family, this caterpillar enjoys a wide range of food, including leaves of ash and jasmine, tecoma, crepe myrtle, and lantana (but probably not nightshades).

Big caterpillars can eat a lot of leaves. Will it harm the plant? Some leaf loss, even up to 20-30%, will not harm a well-established plant. New leaves will soon grow to replace those lost. A very small or newly transplanted tree may be damaged. To control, just pick off the caterpillars and drop in a pail of soapy water. Look closely, these caterpillars are often hard to see, even when quite large.



*Desert willow flower, showing trumpet shape (complete with spider). Color can range from almost white to dark pink.*



*The "willow-like" leaves and slender seed pod of desert willow.*



*L: Rustic sphinx moth caterpillar showing rough skin (2.5"). C: Large caterpillar (about 5"). R: The ends of some older leaves (darker green) have been eaten. New growth is lighter green.*



<sup>1</sup> GRIN Online Database is the source of the currently accepted scientific name.  
<sup>2</sup> For photos see: <http://www.butterfliesandmoths.org/species/Manduca-rustica>.