

The Weekly Plant 4 Oct 2015

Common names: desert cotton, Thurber's cotton, algodoncillo (Spanish for "little cotton"), O'odham name: Ban Tokiga

Scientific name: *Gossypium thurberi*¹

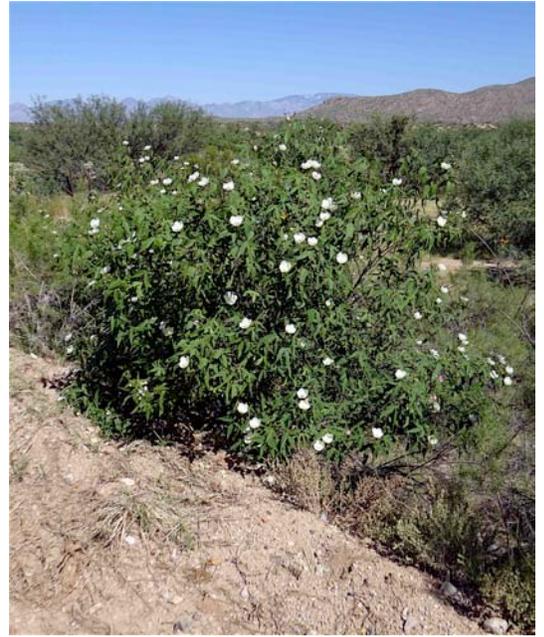
In our Community: on Rincon Mountains side of the road as you drive into town on Old Spanish Trail, about 2/3 mile past Rocking K Ranch

Discussion

We might have lost this plant. Farmers in the 1930's tried to eradicate desert cotton from southern Arizona, believing it harbored a pest that was a threat to cultivated cotton. Fortunately they were wrong, and desert cotton can still be found growing wild in Arizona.



Desert cotton, a 6-7 ft shrub, can be found in rocky canyons and on slopes in riparian areas, grasslands and oak woodlands, at elevations of 2500-6000 ft. It can bloom as early as May but you are more likely to see it flowering from August into fall. The flowers are abundant and showy, enough to attract your attention as you pass by in your car.



The 2 inch flowers are white, often with a pink mark at the base of the five petals. In the center is an elongated female pistil surrounded for most of its length by the male stamen. This structure is characteristic of plants in the mallow family (Malvaceae). This is

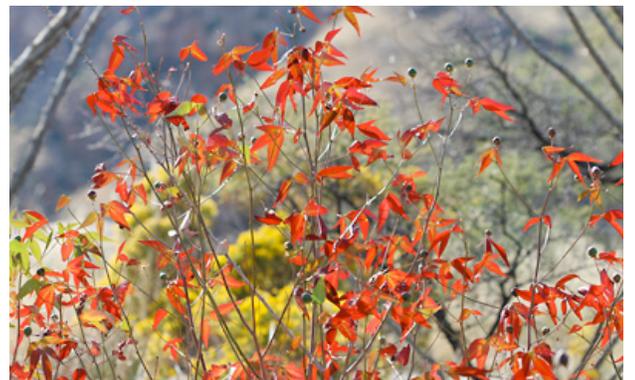
the family of our common orange globe mallow, as well as of hibiscus and hollyhock. Commercial crops from this family include cotton, okra, and cocoa.

As they age, the white flowers fade to pink. The fruit is a small, brown boll that opens into three parts. The seeds inside have just the smallest amount of fiber. No commercial cotton is made from this plant, though it is closely related to the plants used to produce the world's cotton (they also are native to the Americas).



When not in flower, this shrub is still fairly easy to recognize. The leaves are large (7") and divided into 3-5 elongated fingers. Keep a close eye out as we near the end of October. The leaves will turn a brilliant red before they fall.

¹ [Tropicos](#) is the source of the currently accepted scientific name.



Top left: flower of desert cotton. Note the central pistil and many stamen.

Bottom left: open boll (fruit) of desert cotton. The white fluffy stuff is all the cotton you will ever get from this plant. Note: Photo from www.fireflyforest.com.

Right: large green leaf of desert cotton and the dark pink of a faded flower; fall foliage of desert cotton. Note: bottom photo from www.fireflyforest.com.