

The Weekly Plant

26 Nov 2013

Common names: desert honeysuckle, chuparosa

Scientific name: *Anisacanthus thurberi*¹

TAV location:

In front of the Villa, along the sidewalk. Stand on the sidewalk along the road and face the street numbers on the Villa building. Walk just a few feet down the sidewalk toward the community center. For hikers, take the red trail to the bottom of the wash, then hike south staying in the wash. The plants are on the west side of the wash.

Discussion:

You'll find this plant on just about every list of "native plants to attract hummingbirds". It's native to the Tucson area, including the Rincon and Catalina Mountains.

I really, really wanted to love this plant. So, full disclosure, I don't love this plant. It is one of those messy shrubs that can look fine in a wild, natural setting. In a landscape setting it's going to need some routine maintenance and even then, I'm not sure it has enough umph to justify the space it takes.

What's to love: large orange to red (sometimes yellow) flowers that are sure to attract hummingbirds. You'll find the best show in spring, but the plant may flower again in fall, even into November and December with irrigation. The flowers have 4 petals that curl backward (this will help you distinguish it from other, similar plants growing around the Villa). The filaments that hold the anthers are bright red and extend past the petals. The calyx (the green part outside the base of the petals) has five long fingers and lots of glands.

What's not to love: there's lots of false advertising about this plant. First, the name - desert honeysuckle. OK, it grows in the desert, but it's not a honeysuckle - not in the same genus, not even in the same plant family. Then there are the photos of the plant in books and on the web (usually looking like the one below). I'd love to have a plant covered with those flowers but what I get instead with this plant is sparse flowers on a messy shrub. In the wild it grows to 6' x 6'. The young stems are a golden tan and grow upright. As they age, they turn grey white and bend outward (bottom photo, right). In a managed situation, you'll want to do some pruning. Most books I've checked recommend cutting off the oldest stems yearly and cutting back hard every few years. One book even recommended cutting the plant to the ground every spring before new growth begins². See - it's going to take lots of work to keep this plant looking good.

Are there alternatives? Maybe. *Anisacanthus quadrifidus* (flame anisacanthus, native to Texas) has similar flowers (except the petals don't bend back and the calyx does not have long slender fingers). The photos on the web show a plant with a decent form, a low, broad plant. However, I've not seen this plant in person and can't verify. Then, there's chuparosa (no, not this chuparosa, the other chuparosa). I'll cover that plant in the next issue.

¹ The Plant List (Kew Botanic Garden) is the source for the currently accepted name:

<http://www.theplantlist.org/>

² Unfortunately, this plant isn't in my go-to reference for pruning shrubs. However, for other plants this is a great reference: UA Extension pub 1499:

<http://tinyurl.com/AR1499>.



Top: in managed landscape, with irrigation.
Bottom: in the wash. (photos: 11/26/13)



Flower cluster. Note green calyx with long slender "fingers", red filaments (arrow), and curved petals. Leaves are opposite and cold deciduous.

Photos and text by Mary Welch-Keesey