

The Weekly Plant 8 December 2016

Common names: coyote gourd, finger-leaf gourd, five-finger gourd, bitter squash

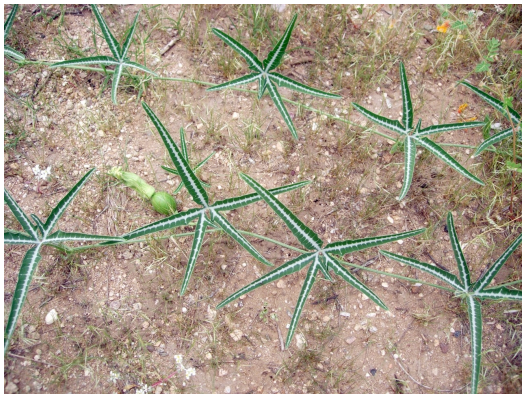
Scientific name: *Cucurbita digitata*¹

In our Community: from Javelina Way, turn right onto Galileo. Look for small pile of white rock along road on right, then look into the wash. If you get to the fire hydrant you have gone too far.

Discussion

‘For pottage and puddings and custards and pies
Our pumpkins and parsnips are common supplies;
We have pumpkin at morning and pumpkin at noon
If it was not for pumpkin we should be undone.’²

I heard this ditty years ago and it stuck in my mind, especially the last two lines. While we don’t have the ever-sustaining pumpkin growing in the Village, we do have a close relative decorating a tree with holiday cheer.



Coyote gourd is native to southern Arizona and California and adjacent Mexico. It is a perennial with a vining habit that dies to the ground each winter. New growth begins in spring, producing stems several yards long. These stems run along the ground or, if given the opportunity, climb into trees using tendrils that look like tightly coiled springs. The leaf has five thin lobes (five “fingers”), each up to 5” long and marked with a white center stripe.

Over the summer both male and female flowers are produced. Fruit is a small (3-4” diameter), round, striped gourd, initially green, then turning yellow. It is these yellow “holiday ornaments” you’ll see hanging in the tree in the wash along Galileo.

The fruit of coyote gourd is inedible, both toxic and bitter. The seeds are edible, though, and can be eaten by both humans and our native wildlife.



Coyote gourd belongs to the gourd family (Cucurbitaceae). Notable Old World members of this family are melons, including watermelon, cucumber, sponge gourds (luffa), and bottle gourds. The genus *Cucurbita* is exclusively New World and includes all the vegetables we know as squash.³ Just five domesticated species provide the life-sustaining, storable winter squash such as pumpkin and acorn; summer squash such as zucchini, yellow, and pattypan; and a variety of colorful, warty ornamental gourds.



Left, top: 5-fingered leaves arrayed along two long, viney stems.

Left, center: female flower. The ovary (which becomes the fruit) is below the flower petals.

Left, bottom: male flower; note absence of ovary. Male flowers and female flowers are formed separately but on the same plant. For photo of open petals see [here](#).

Right, center: 3 gourds, two immature and green. The brown “stuff” at the end of the fruit are the dried petals

Right, bottom: the spring-like tendril that wraps around small branches and helps the vine climb.

Photos described here taken 3 Sept 2014 near Rincon Market.

Photos and text by Mary Welch-Keesey

Somehow it just wouldn’t be holiday season without pumpkin pie.

1 [Tropicos](#) is source for accepted scientific name.

2 By Captain Edward Johnson, in his 1628 history of New England, “Wonder-Working Providence.” He was scolding Pilgrims for their lack of enthusiasm for pumpkin. More info [here](#). By the way, parsnips were brought to this country from the Old World. They were used as a sweetener in Europe before the introduction of cane sugar.

3 This includes butternut, buttercup, Hubbard, Kabocha, Turk’s turban, cushaw pumpkin, figleaf gourd, crookneck, golden cushaw, Dickinson field pumpkin (used for canned pumpkin), Calabaza, Delicata, and spaghetti, to name just a few.

