

The Weekly Plant

13 May 2012

Common names: cat's claw, catclaw acacia, wait-a-minute (bush), devil's claw, Gregg catclaw, tearblanket
Scientific name: *Senegalia greggii*, formerly *Acacia greggii* ¹

TAV location:

Along the road: across from lot 133 (Patel), on Galileo south of Javelina way on Rincon side of road (by metal poles). Along the trails: in low areas of all 3 trails.

Discussion:

Arizona Flora (published 1951) lists six species in the genus *Acacia* as native to Arizona. Worldwide there are about 1300 species, almost 1000 of those native to Australia. Acacias are found in dry regions of North and South America, Australia, Africa and the Middle East, and Asia². One of my landscape books lists 31 species suitable for the desert Southwest (obviously mostly drawn from outside Arizona)³.



Catclaw acacia can reach 15-20' if given ample moisture.

As you might expect, a genus this large with such a broad distribution shows great diversity. In 2005 an extensive study split *Acacia* into five genera. Most of the Australian species stayed in the genus *Acacia*. Non-Australian species were divided among *Senegalia*, *Vachellia*, *Acaciella*, and *Mariosousa*. Arizona can proudly claim as native species in each of these four genera.

Every time scientific names change there is much gnashing of teeth. It's hard enough to memorize one Latin name and now you must memorize another! In this case the change may be helpful in identifying plants. If there are 1300 species in a genus of great diversity, it is hard to determine one, single feature that makes a plant an *Acacia* and not something else. With the new classification, I can tell you exactly why catclaw acacia is now *Senegalia greggii* and not a *Vachellia*, *Acacia*, or *Acaciella*. It's the prickles.

In everyday conversation, we use "thorn" for any sharp plant part. In botany, three words are used. A thorn is a modified branch (like the sharp branch tip on littleleaf paloverde, last week's plant). Spines are modified leaves and are often found at nodes (where the leaf connects to the stem). Prickles on *Senegalias* grow from the bark of the branch and are scattered along the branch, only rarely at a node. Plants in the genera *Acaciella*, *Vachellia*, and *Acacia* may have thorns or spines, but never prickles.

Catclaw acacia is a large shrub/small tree that grows most profusely near drainage areas (if you hike TAV's trails, keep a watch for the plant and note its location). The leaves are up to 3" long, with many small leaflets, and may fall due to drought or cold. Small, dark, curved, very sharp prickles (the location on the stem tells you it is a prickles and not a thorn or spine) easily snag and tear cloth and skin. The small, pale yellow flowers are held in elongated clusters about 2" long, quite abundant. The "pea pod" fruit is slightly constricted between the seeds.



Top: note prickles are not at nodes. Bottom: sepals and petals are tiny; the many stamens are long and showy.

¹ GRIN Online Database is the source of the currently accepted scientific name. ² from Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acacia> ³ *Landscape Plants for Dry Regions*, Warren Jones and Charles Sacamano, 2000