WEED OR WILDFLOWER?

A weed is often defined as a plant that is growing where it is not wanted. However, the same plant growing in a field or where it does not interfere with our planned landscape is called a wildflower. This article will review a few of the plants we commonly see blooming this time of year either in our yards or on the undeveloped land and roadways. Whether to eradicate these plants from your yard or include them in your landscape, familiarity is important.

Two wildflowers (or weeds) which people do need to be able to distinguish are the Scorpionweed and the Arizona Lupine.

**Scorpionweed** (<i>Phacelia crenulata</i>) is in the Boraginaceae Family. It grows to about 16 inches tall and has violet-purple bell-shaped flowers in finely haired,
terminal coils. The leaves are dark green, much divided, and hairy up to five inches long. The name “scorpionweed” refers to the curling flower heads which somewhat resembles the flexed tail of a scorpion in striking position. Any contact with Scorpionweed can produce a skin rash very similar to poison oak. Therefore, be aware of walking through scorpionweed or of pets running through it since your clothing or pet’s fur can transfer the plant fibers to you.

The Arizona Lupine (*Lupinus arizonicus*) is a member of the Fabaceae Family (pea family). This annual has pale pink to purplish blooms, but is usually a slightly paler color than the Scorpionweed flower and blooms in an erect spear above bright green, palmately divided leaves. Lupines are among the old dependables of spring flower displays. The name “lupine” comes from the Latin word meaning “wolf” and was applied to this plant because it was believed to rob the soil of its fertility. Actually, in common with other members of the Pea Family, it is capable of fixing nitrogen in the soil and actually improves the land on which it grows.
Another yellow-colored wildflower you can see around town right now is a member of the Evening Primrose Family (*Camissonia brevipes*) and is commonly called **Yellow-Cups**. This lovely flower can grow up to almost two feet tall and has bright yellow flowers with four cup-shaped petals. The leaves are green with a reddish tinge growing mostly in a basal rosette. This evening primrose blooms at sunrise instead of sunset like some of the other evening primroses.

Next is an invasive weed called **Sahara Mustard** (*Brassica tournefortii*). In just one year it has multiplied in enormous amounts here in Lake Havasu since this time last year. If this weed goes unchecked it will become our number one weed problem and will place scorpion weed on the number two list. Sahara mustard is commonly known as African mustard, Asian mustard or wild turnip and is a member of the mustard family. This is no ordinary weed and is very destructive. It is an early bloomer (December/January) and grows quickly, therefore using resources such as water and nutrients around it before competition from other plants can occur. It will smother wildflowers such as lupine, poppies, and verbena along with native plants such as creosote bush. The plant also has high oxalic content so it may be toxic to our desert tortoises and because of its aggressive
growth pattern affect wildlife by altering the availability of forage plants and habitat structure.

Identifying Sahara mustard is easy. Many of us may think of it as a wildflower because of the yellow flowers that it produces but don’t let it fool you. Sahara mustard is an erect annual that can grow from four to forty inches tall. The stems branch from the base of the plant and have rough, stinging hairs that can be hurtful if touched (but is not poisonous like scorpion weed and will not leave a rash). When the leaves are crushed they smell like cabbage or turnips. The basal rosette of the leaves can be three to twelve inches long and look like that of a dandelion plant. The leaves get smaller as they grow up the stem. The flowers are small, less than a quarter of an inch, with four oblong yellow petals in the shape of an X. This flower will then turn into a fruit. The fruits are narrow seed capsules that break open when mature and disperse seeds. The seeds are tiny and reddish brown. The mucilaginous coating on the seeds makes them both sticky when wet and waterproofs them. This is what allows the seeds to survive in dormant conditions up to two months or under water for two months. One well-developed plant can produce between 750-9,000 seeds. Tests have shown that Sahara mustard may be self-fertile since fruit set is nearly 100% on most plants and can still germinate after sitting 3 years in dormancy. Disbursement of the seeds comes in various ways; wind, water, animals and humans. Wind, through dried plants that pull up and travel like tumbleweeds and therefore dispersing the seeds. Water, by rains that fill washes which flows into lakes and rivers. Animals, by both eating the seeds or by the seeds attaching to their skin/feathers. And then there are humans either by walking through the mustard or the seeds attaching to the tires of vehicles and recreational vehicles (ATVs, dirt bikes, etc).
Either way, once established it can move into wild land areas and sand dunes at an aggressive pace so it is imperative that further establishment of this weed be prevented and that existing plants be eradicated.

Experiments to find effective ways to control Sahara mustard are ongoing. The best control is prevention and the best prevention is manual pulling of this plant prior to its “going to seed”. The impact of Sahara mustard is high and is now on control strategies in several states and is on red flag alert here in Arizona. So, if you see this weed on your property, pull it now prior to it going to seed.

These are only a few of the weeds and wildflowers that you can see in your own yard or neighborhood at this time of year. Take a few minutes to enjoy their beautiful blooms and unique characteristics that allow them to live in our desert. At the same token, eradicate the “bad guys” from your yard by putting down a pre-emergent or pulling out the entire plant.

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