

Native Plants of Deer Canyon Preserve

Tassel flower: October 2011



The arrival of fall on the Preserve usually brings a new display of flowers as many of our familiar summer blooms have gone to fruit, dutifully completing their role in the reproductive cycle. Among those fall blooms are the brickelbushes in the genus *Brickellia*, named for an Irish physician and naturalist who settled in Georgia, John Brickell (1749-1809). New Mexico is host to 19 native species of brickelbushes, most of which have relatively inconspicuous flowers. Of the three species I have found on the Preserve, the one with the showiest flowers is *Brickellia grandiflora*, the tassel flower. The species epithet of this plant is derived from the Latin words *grandis*, meaning large or abundant, and *floris*, meaning flower. So this descriptor can be interpreted as indicating either a plant with large flowers or a plant with many flowers (in this case both seem to apply). Some other common names for tassel flower are tassel-flowered bricklebush, large-flowered bricklebush, and my personal favorite, golden sashay.

Tassel flower is an herbaceous perennial with a single stem that may become somewhat woody at its base. The plant typically grows on the slopes, canyons, and arroyos of piñon-juniper woodlands. The slightly hairy stem may become branched along its upper part producing a plant up to 40 inches tall. The leaves are borne on a petiole that is shorter than the leaf blade, which is triangular in shape and coarsely toothed. When the leaf blade is viewed from the above, its distinct main veins and elongated lance-shaped tip are apparent. Close inspection of the grayish underside of a leaf reveals glands appearing as small dots that make the leaf sticky and aromatic.



The flowers of tassel flower bloom from August to October and arise in small clusters at the ends of upper stems. Another member of the familiar Asteraceae family, what appears to be a single, drooping flower is actually an elongated head consisting of 20 - 40 disk flowers and no ray flowers. The phyllaries (modified leaves that enclose the base of the floral head) are green, elongated and overlapping. Each tiny tubular disk flower is yellowish-white in color and contains both male and female sex organs protruding at what appear to be random angles from the floral tube. Successful pollination and fertilization results in the production of a small, elongated dry fruit, technically called an achene, with an outer surface distinguished by ten ribs and fine hairs.



Tassel flower has a long history of medicinal uses. Navajos prepared an infusion of dried leaves to treat headaches. The Western Keres used an infusion as a liver medicine and treated rheumatism with a salve prepared from dried leaves. Tassel flower is known as *prodigiosa* or *amula* by Mexican herbalists today where it is claimed to lower blood sugar levels and therefore used in treating type II diabetes. It is also purported to increase digestive secretions, including bile and therefore is believed to help flush out small gallstones. Notwithstanding its medicinal effectiveness and its relatively plain blossoms, I find the frantic "fringes" of the tassel flower's blooms to be irresistibly intriguing, and encourage everyone to seek out this plant and have a close look at its playful dangles.