

On the Wild Side – January, 2010
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Dasyilirion wheeleri – Desert Spoon or Sotol

This tough plant is an evergreen shrub that many people incorrectly assume is a variety of Yucca. It looks somewhat similar, but is actually a member of the Agave Family (Agavaceae). It is a Southwest or desert native found in southeastern Arizona, southern New Mexico, west Texas and Mexico at elevations from 3,000 to 6,000 feet. Desert Spoon grows slowly and forms a rounded clump of silver-blue foliage four to six feet tall and wide. The narrow two to three foot long leaves radiating from a central trunk have teeth along their margins that curve back towards the center. Each leaf has a spoon shaped base (giving the plant its name) where it attaches to the trunk. You can see the “spoons” in dead plants that are falling apart or on dead leaves you may be pruning. The spoons are sometimes used in dried flower arrangements, but flower show schedules often prohibit their use. Occasionally in spring or summer (May to July) the Desert Spoon produces a 12 to 15 foot tall flower spike with cream colored flower clusters near the top. Male and female flowers grow on separate plants and are wind pollinated. The female flower spikes are a little larger in diameter than the male flower spikes and produce seeds contained in papery three winged shells that are dispersed by the wind after ripening.

Desert Spoon was used in many ways by native Americans. They stripped the leaves of their thorns and wove them into baskets, mats and thatch. They used fibers of the youngest leaves to make rope. Immature flowering stalks were cooked and eaten or could be distilled into an alcoholic beverage. A liquor called sotol is still made in some parts of Mexico.

This plant is tolerant of extremes in temperature – both hot and cold. It is hardy to 0 degrees and grows well in full or reflected sun. Its growth is slow to moderate and its shape improves with age. It is drought tolerant but grows best when the root zone is soaked about once every two weeks in spring and summer. It prefers good drainage. Desert Spoon is a long-lived and low maintenance dramatic accent plant or specimen plant for desert gardens. Give it plenty of room to grow. It should not be planted in high traffic areas or tight spaces. You will want to wear a long sleeved shirt and heavy gloves when you are working close to the plant. Because of the toothed leaves, the plant can be used in security plantings. *Dasyilirion acrotrichum* or Green Desert Spoon has bright green leaves with teeth that curve towards the tip of the leaf. Javelinas and jackrabbits will eat the leaves and seem to prefer the Green Desert Spoon. There is another *Dasyilirion* not called a desert spoon. It is *Dasyilirion longissimum* or Mexican Grass Tree. It has slender, smooth, thornless leaves that grow up to six feet long from a central trunk forming a dramatic six foot rosette. Desert Spoons are being planted in several commercial landscapes around town in Ridgecrest. One growing behind the Mojave Desert bank on Norma Street was in bloom this past summer and fall. Plants may be purchased from nurseries specializing in desert natives and are usually included on the plant sale order form for the sales sponsored by Desert Mountain RC&D and Oasis Garden Club.

Facts for this article were obtained from the following sources:

Cool Plants for Hot Gardens – Greg Starr

Mountain States Wholesale Nursery website

Native Plants for Southwestern Landscapes – Judy Mielke

Shrubs and Trees of the Southwest Deserts – Janice Emily Bowers

Sunset Western Garden Book