

The Weekly Plant

22 May 2016

Common names: kidneywood

Scientific name: *Eysenhardtia orthocarpa*¹

In our Community: in front of house on lot 35.

Discussion

I'll confess. I really like this plant! If you're tired of palo verde, mesquite, and desert willow but want a tree that will get large enough to shade your house, kidneywood might be the alternative you're seeking.

Kidneywood is native to southeastern Arizona (including our local national park) and the far southwestern portion of New Mexico, as well as Mexico. Matt Johnson of the Desert Legume Project recently talked at ASA and indicated this plant was one of the legumes (plants in the pea/bean family) they recommended to the landscape industry. You may need to search a bit to find this plant (try nurseries that specialize in native plants - Desert Survivors, Tohono Chul and perhaps Civano), but it's worth the effort. You'll be rewarded with a small native tree that flowers all summer and attracts wildlife.



The one downside to this plant is that it is cold deciduous. I've grown it in my yard for two winters and the leaves have dropped both years. It leafs out very late - late April - but starts to flower at the same time. Those white flowers have a lovely vanilla fragrance and attract both bees and hummingbirds. On the plus side, it flowers off and on for most of the summer. If you add this plant to your yard, be warned. The rabbits love to chew on the bark and can kill a newly planted tree. Protect it with a circle of chicken wire immediately after planting.

Kidneywood grows as a multi-stemmed shrub, eventually reaching 15-20 feet tall and 12+ feet wide, essentially a small tree. It has a

moderate growth rate, perhaps faster with ample irrigation. The flowers are white, held in 3" elongated clusters. Small, one-seeded pea pods form from the flowers and may provide additional plants for your yard.

In my yard, both bees and hummingbirds visit the flowers of kidneywood. It is listed as a larval plant for [gray hairstreak](#) and [Arizona mottled skipper](#) butterflies. The caterpillars of these species will eat the leaves of the plant.

If you Google kidneywood, you will find reference to palo azul. This apparently refers to a related Mexican species - *Eysenhardtia polystachya* - that has historically been used to treat kidney problems.

Apparently the wood of this plant will fluoresce in water. Thus, we find the source of both the common name in English, used for all plants in the genus *Eysenhardtia*, and in Spanish - palo azul - referring to the blue fluorescence.

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

Top left: flower spikes are often clustered together.

Bottom left: Each flower forms a pea pod, about 1/2" long, that contains a single seed.

Top right: the leaves are kidney wood are compound, 4+ inches long, with 11 or more small leaflets.

Bottom right: older kidneywoods have decorative, shredding bark.

Younger plants have rough bark that is eagerly eaten by rabbits.

