

The Weekly Plant 29 Sept 2016

Common names: indigo bush, prairie clover

Scientific name: these plants are in the genus *Dalea*¹

Discussion

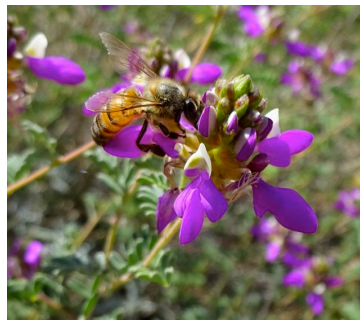
Dalea is a large genus native to the New World. There are 160 species, found from Canada to Argentina. Sixty-two of those are native to the US and almost half of those are native to Arizona. Though you can usually tell when you have a *Dalea*, it's not always easy to determine which one you have. This 100th issue of Weekly Plant describes several of the *Daleas* you are most likely to see in our area.

First, let's deal with pronunciation. I tend to say *da-LE-uh*, but that's not how Arizonans pronounce it. They say *DAHL-ya*. The problem is that there is another plant, *Dahlia*, pronounced in the United States as *DAHL-ya*. Yep, that's two *DAHL-yas*. I just can't bring myself to say *DAHL-ya* for *Dalea* so I've reverted to writing the name on paper as needed at garden centers and keeping my mouth shut.

Daleas are in the pea family (Fabaceae). They all have the classic pea flower (see photos) but unlike most peas, they have very small pods, usually with only one seed. Flowers may be blue, purple, white, yellow, or bicolor. *Daleas* are "rub and sniff" plants. The leaves, stems, and sometimes flowers are covered with glands, which are often visible to the naked eye. When the leaves are rubbed, the glands break open and release fragrant oils. These characteristics are shared by closely related plants such as *Eysenhardtia* (kidneywood), *Psoralea* (smoketree found in Joshua Tree National Park), and *Amorpha* (leadplant of Midwestern prairies).

Because they have attractive flowers, don't produce a lot of pod litter, are often evergreen, and generally smell good (like citrus), shrubby *Daleas* are popular landscape plants in our area. They most often have blue or purple flowers and are commonly known as indigo bush. These *Daleas* may drop their leaves in summer in response to drought. Extra water at that time will keep them attractive. Most of these plants also have an attractive form if left to grow naturally. This makes them easy care: you only need to prune them occasionally and then only lightly.

Blooming now, as it does every fall, is *Dalea frutescens* or black dalea. This is a small shrub from the Chihuahuan desert region of the US and Mexico. For several weeks it is covered with red-purple flowers and those flowers are covered with bees, hundreds of bees. This is a great plant for small areas. It has a mounding form, reaching no more than 3 feet high and just a bit wider, with evergreen leaves. The main maintenance is removing grasses and other plants that like to grow within it. Prune lightly in spring if and only if it gets leggy. You can see this plant on lot 12. Stand at the intersection of the driveway and road. In a nursery, you may find it under the name Sierra Negra™.



Black Dalea: Top of page: form.
Above, flower cluster and glands on leaves



Feather Dalea: Left: form. Right: Flower and leaf. Though there are only a few flowers in each cluster, they are showy. Note glands on sepals and on leaflets.

Feather dalea (*Dalea formosa*) is a Rincon Mountain native. It is similar in form and size to black dalea but drops its leaves in winter. It blooms in spring, then again lightly after monsoon. Feathery plumes surround the seed pod, making an easy ID. It is browsed by deer and other animals and was used medicinally by native peoples. Unfortunately, I have not been able to find this plant commercially.

Photos and text by
Mary Welch-Keesey

Another Rincon Mountain native, readily available commercially, is *Dalea pulchra*, the plant most commonly known as “indigo bush”. Hike or drive in Saguaro East in spring and you are almost sure to see this plant in flower. It grows to 4-5 feet in height, more tall and slender than short and wide. Blooms can appear as early as late December and continue into spring. It appreciates extra water in summer and very light pruning only if needed in early summer.

Indigo Bush: Left: tall, narrow form.
Top right: flower cluster
Bottom right: circular glands on leaflet



Groundcovers are always welcome, and two *Daleas* fill that need admirably, though neither are native.



Trailing Indigo Bush: Left: low, spreading form (that’s one plant). Center: long, slender stems. Right: flower cluster

Dalea greggii, trailing indigo bush, is native to Texas and Mexico. It stays low - 2 feet - and a single plant can spread over 9 feet. Make sure you give it plenty of space. The long, thin stems will root if they touch the ground, making this an excellent plant for erosion control on slopes. (You can see this by standing directly in front of lot 173, then looking left to the slope of lot 172. There are several *Dalea greggii* growing on the slope.) The books all say this plant flowers in spring and then through the summer. My random observations suggest it flowers best during cooler weather. Some plants are just coming into bloom now.



Lemon dalea (*Dalea capitata*) works as a semi-evergreen, groundcover in smaller areas (leaves may fall if temperature drops into the 20s). It grows to only 8” x 36” and is covered with yellow flowers in spring and fall. It is a native of Mexico and is new to the nursery trade. Plant it where you’ll walk, as it has one of the nicest fragrances of all the *Daleas*.

Other larger *Daleas* you may find at nurseries are *Dalea bicolor* and *Dalea versicolor* with blue-purple flowers and *Dalea albiflora* with white flowers. All grow to 3-4 feet. The last two are Rincon Mountain natives.

Lemon Dalea: Top left: form
Bottom left: leaves, note black glands
Right: showy yellow flowers. Note dark dots (glands) on sepals



Two smaller *Daleas* are native wildings in Academy Village.

I've found bearded prairie clover (*Dalea pogonathera*) in only one place - along the former red trail connector between lots 157 and 160, about half-way to the blue trail - blooming in March and also in August. It's only about a foot tall and easy to miss when not in flower. The leaves are much larger than those of any other *Dalea* described here. I can find almost no information on this plant, other than it is great for bees and is eaten by deer. It is native to southern Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas.



Bearded Prairie Clover: form, leaves, and flower cluster



The other wilding *Dalea* is much more common. Downy prairie clover (*Dalea neomexicana*) is only about an inch high but spreads to a foot or more. The sepals of the small flowers are covered with white hairs. You see those and not the petals, which are hidden below. Hairy prairie clover (*Dalea mollis*) and soft prairie clover (*Dalea mollissima*) are very similar, varying only in the pattern of the glands on the leaves and the length of the hairy sepals.² Yes, I could have the ID wrong, but I know it is one of these three. All three are found in Pima County. I have a love-hate relationship with the plant because, well, it does look a bit weedy. I prefer to remove it in my landscape if it close to the house, but to leave it to grow in the more open, naturalized areas.



Downy Prairie Clover:

Top left: form. This plant lays flat against the ground and sends out long stems.

Bottom left: leaf. The bumps along the edges of the leaflets are the glands. The leaves have a light, pleasant citrusy scent when crushed.

Right: flower cluster. The flowers are white to pale purple and are mostly hidden by all those white hairs.

With so many *Daleas* to choose from, there's sure to be one that works in your landscape. Most *Daleas* are great landscape plants, supporting a wide variety of bees. Butterflies will also visit the flowers (*Daleas* are one of the larval plants of the [Southern dogface butterfly](#)). Add in pleasantly scented, mostly evergreen foliage, and it's hard to go wrong.

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

² Many thanks to the staff of the University of Arizona Herbarium for helpful discussions, half a million plant samples, and *Dalea* references two inches thick.