

The Weekly Plant

14 October 2016

Common names: smallhead snakeweed, threadleaf snakeweed

Scientific name: *Gutierrezia microcephala*¹

In our Community: stand in road in front of lot 13 and walk toward lot 12. After you pass the utility boxes, look to the right and down into the wash. It's a shrub with bright yellow flowers.

Discussion

I overlooked this plant for several years, thinking it was just a variant of *isocoma*, a plant particularly abundant in our Village. Finally, a closer look revealed a small, shrubby plant with narrow, linear leaves and very small flower heads. Looking at it now, in peak bloom when the *isocoma* have mostly faded, it's easy to realize my mistake.

Smallhead snakeweed indeed has small flower heads that are the key to the ID. There is almost always only one ray flower (the one with the showy petal) and one disc flower. Other similar species have more ray flowers or simply have flower heads with many more flowers, whether ray or disc.



This plant, native to a wide swatch of southwest US (including the Rincon Mountains), usually grows to no more than 2 feet high. It branches readily and often has a nicely rounded form. Several other snakeweed (other species of *Gutierrezia*) are also native to this area and were used medicinally, sometimes to treat snake bites, hence "snakeweed".

Smallhead snakeweed grows best in full sun in well-drained rocky, sandy, or gravelly soil where competition from grasses is limited. High densities of this plant often indicate rangeland that has been mismanaged by overgrazing. This is unfortunate, since smallhead snakeweed, and other *Gutierrezia* species as

well, can be toxic to sheep, cattle, and goats. Smallhead snakeweed does not seem to attract butterflies, but I have seen small beetles, bees, wasps, and grasshoppers feeding on the flowers. This plant's low habit suggest it could provide shelter for birds and small mammals.

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

Top right: smallhead snakeweed has a small but attractive, rounded form. At flowering most of the lower leaves have dried and fallen off.

Left: narrow, alternate leaves

Middle right: the underside of many small flower heads.

Lower right: each flower head has one ray flower (pink arrows) and one disc flower. The disc flower has 5 very small petals that are often curled (blue arrows).

