



LANTANA: AN ATTRACTIVE SHRUB FOR DESERT LANDSCAPES
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INTRODUCTION

One plant that now has an important place in water-thrifty landscapes is *lantana*. Its vividly colored flowers make this shrub a welcome addition to desert landscapes, which can sometimes appear stark. It tolerates the high temperatures that occur during Mojave Desert summers and will continue to produce flowers until late in the fall. This is a plant for sunny areas, blooming best when kept out of shade. Its water requirements are relatively low, and it has few insect or disease pests.

ORIGIN

Where lantana originally evolved is not certain, but many authors believe that it probably originated in the Caribbean. For over 300 years, it has been included in gardens wherever the climate is mild. It has now become naturalized in over 60 countries worldwide, particularly in areas of high relative humidity, warm temperatures and mild winters.

There are over 100 species of lantana, and many more hybrids. Quite a few of the hybrids used in landscapes are cultivated from *Lantana camara*, although the varieties that display a trailing habit are mainly hybrids of *Lantana montevidensis*. Another species is *Lantana horrida*. The name refers to the smell of the leaves when they are crushed.



Orange-yellow flowers are very common in lantana.
Photo: Angela O'Callaghan

ADVANTAGES

A number of factors make lantana desirable for southern Nevada landscapes. Many desert flowers are yellow. Lantana's range of flower color is impressive – variants of orange and yellow are the most frequently found colors, but white, pink and lavender-hued flowers are also widely available.

The infertile, alkaline soils of the desert southwest frequently contain high levels of salt. These conditions can pose major problems for many landscape plants in the desert, but lantana can tolerate these conditions.

Once established in the landscape, lantana requires relatively low amounts of irrigation, and will even tolerate some drought conditions.

With its vivid colors and the arrangement of its flowers, lantana is attractive to butterflies. Southern Nevada butterflies attracted to lantana include:

- Painted lady (*Vanessa cardui*)
- Common Buckeye (*Junonia coenia*)
- Western Tiger Swallowtail (*Papilio rutuuis*)

Lantana nectar is a primary food source of Gulf fritillary (*Agraulis vanillae*) and Pipevine swallowtail (*Battus philenor*) adult butterflies.

Researchers in India have discovered that oils from lantana can repel the *Aedes* mosquito, which spreads malaria.

CULTURE



Lantana used as a hedge. Photo: Angela O'Callaghan

In southern Nevada, lantana grows as a shrub that can reach six feet across. Pruning can maintain it at a reasonable size. It can be planted throughout most of the year, but spring and fall are the usual planting times. Lantana should be planted in a bright location that receives at least eight hours of direct sun daily. If only indirect light is available, the spot needs to remain bright for a longer period.

In order to modify the low fertility levels of many southern Nevada soils, incorporate a small amount of compost or other soil amendment into the growing medium at planting time. Most important, the soil should be well drained. Lantana can tolerate drought conditions, but will not thrive if it is placed in an area that stays excessively wet. As with most plants, the planting hole should be no deeper than the root ball, but three to five times as wide.

As it is a hardy plant, lantana does not require large amounts of fertilization. Applying too much nitrogen fertilizer, especially when it has begun flowering, will frequently result in decreased flower production, and even cause the plant to become over-succulent. Like many other landscape plants, it should receive infrequent, deep irrigation.

Lantana is a fast-growing shrub that produces its flowers on new wood. For these reasons, it should be pruned hard (down to 16" or less) in late January in order to promote new growth and flowering during the summer and fall.

While the above-ground growth will be damaged by a hard frost, the plant will recover unless its roots have been seriously injured. In areas where winters are harsh, such as northern Nevada, it is generally treated as an annual or grown as an attractive potted plant. In this case,

it performs well so long as it receives sufficient levels of light.

PROBLEMS OF LANTANA

Lantana is relatively problem free, especially in southern Nevada. As mentioned above, the plant will not tolerate excess moisture, which can cause root rot. While the plant will grow under partial shade conditions, it will flower poorly. If it is placed in an area that is both shaded and excessively humid, it may develop foliar diseases such as powdery mildew.

Although lantana lace bug (*Teleonemia scrupulosa* Stål), is known to defoliate lantana in some parts of the world, this insect has not been reported in Nevada to date. It is less than ½” long and 1/10” wide (~1 cm x 0.2 cm); if you believe you have seen it, report it to the Nevada state entomologist.



Lantana lace bug on underside of leaf. Photo: Forest & Kim Starr . Used with permission.

PROBLEMS THAT LANTANA MAY POSE

The lantana species and fertile hybrids will produce dark berries if the flowers have been pollinated. There are published reports that lantana is toxic to certain mammals, particularly cattle. Humans should avoid consuming the poisonous immature berries, which can cause digestive and cardiac problems. Birds, however, are attracted to the berries and seeds. Primarily because of birds, lantana has spread to many parts of the world.

It is now treated as a noxious invasive weed in Australia, Florida, Hawaii and the Galapagos Islands, where it takes over, to the detriment of native plant populations. These areas have much higher precipitation rates and more fertile soils than those of southern Nevada.

In addition, lantana produces chemicals (“allelochemicals”) that have proven to inhibit the germination and growth of other plants, both desirable crop plants and weeds. It is being studied as a possible weed management tool.

VARIETIES

Southern Nevada’s hot, dry conditions are not conducive to lantana becoming invasive. Despite this, it is important to use sterile hybrids, ones that will not produce seeds liable to be spread to other, more vulnerable areas. Removing spent blossoms can also limit the number of berries produced.



Pink and yellow flowers on a hybrid lantana. Photo: Angela O’Callaghan



Golden lantana in desert landscape. Photo: Angela O'Callaghan

Plant breeders have produced a number of hybrids that are not only sterile, but have a much wider range of flower color and longer blooming times.

Among these are

- 'New Gold'
- 'Purple trailing'
- 'Dallas red'

These cultivars are widely available, and produce vivid flowers but no viable seeds.



Purple trailing lantana. Photo: Angela O'Callaghan

CONCLUSION

Lantana is a colorful, water-efficient shrub for desert landscapes. As long as it is placed in a bright locale with well-drained soil, it is relatively easy to maintain. Its bright flowers make it a welcome addition to a butterfly-attracting garden. It has few insect or disease pests, and does not require high levels of fertilization. Using sterile hybrids ensures that this attractive plant will not become a nuisance or an invasive weed.

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