

## Desert willow



*Desert Willow*

One of the many surprises of life in the desert is seeing the floral displays that appear. From the yellows on the Palo Verde to the lovely range of colors that occur in cactus flowers, even hot, late spring puts on a great show. We often think of plants that thrive in the desert as having only a stark kind of loveliness – the waxy leaves of a creosote bush and its tiny yellow flowers, or the dull grayness of a quail bush. Those are evidence of the plant’s determination to survive here, despite the terrible soil and serious lack of moisture. Even among the natives of this harsh land though, there is an array of flowers – orange colored globe mallow is a treat for the eyes, and now desert marigold showing off all along the highways.

Of all the flowers that appear in the spring, a favorite must be the desert willow. This is not a not a willow like a weeping willow (*Salix*), which requires water, and a lot of it. Desert willow (*Chilopsis linearis*) is a plant that evolved here, where water is precious and rare. As a result, it is efficient at finding whatever water is available. This is a southwest native that can be found in some home gardens. It can be either a tree or a multi-stemmed shrub – the shrub is closer to the original form. The tree can grow as tall as 30 feet, and might have a spread up to 20 feet across. Just the shape of the tree itself is pleasing; the canopy is full of slender leaves that can provide much needed shade in the summer. Depending on the variety, the leaves range from three to up to five inches long. Being deciduous, the leaves drop off in the fall.

What makes the desert willow such a dramatic element is the floral explosion that happens in mid to late spring. The tree becomes covered in small flowers that look like miniature orchids. These “orchids” range from white to purple – the outer part of the flower is pale, and the throat, deep pink to magenta. A whole tree covered in these blossoms is glorious.

Wildlife loves the tree, as well. Hummingbirds appreciate desert willow, and they will take possession of it! I have seen serious disputes when two hummingbirds decide they both want to visit the plant at the same time. A two- inch bird will quarrel mightily with another two- inch bird over a twenty-foot tree with hundreds of flowers. They are almost as bad as people.

Some people are less than fond of the desert willow, because they can be messy. The native varieties produce pods that fall off, or open up and spread seeds all over. Now, there are hybrids that produce very few, if any pods, so if that has been an issue for you, it does not need to be. Take a look at the range of colors you can put in your landscape, and from a shade tree at that.

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