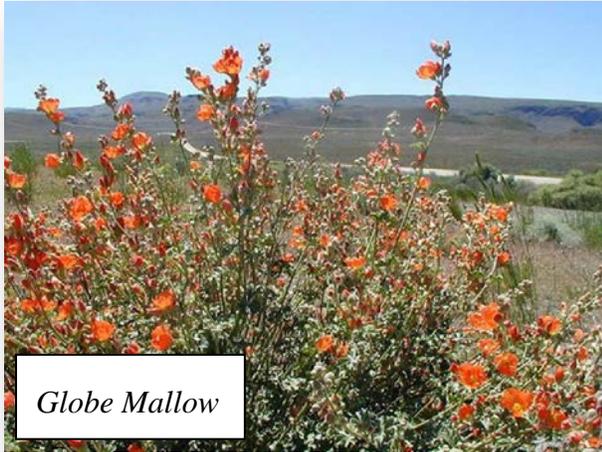


Globe Mallow



Few flowers are able to thrive in our desert climate, so when one appears to enjoy growing here, we want to place it in our gardens. That could be one reason for the excess of oleanders and Texas rangers in Southern Nevada. While the desert presents a set of impossibly tough conditions for many life forms, there are natives which have evolved in this environment. Globe mallow, or globemallow, is one of those plants that make me smile.

It is a shrubby plant that seldom grows more than four feet tall and wide. While it is a perennial, it rarely survives for

more than five years. One way to maintain it is to cut it almost to the ground during its winter dormancy. When handling it, remember its other common name – “sore-eye poppy”. Do not rub your eyes after touching the leaves.

Sphaeralcea ambigua is the scientific name for this indigenous plant. In its wild form, it appears all over the desert. It is easy to recognize, having several effective adaptations for life with little water or soil fertility, but a surfeit of sunlight and wind.

First, the lovely flowers are not large, about an inch across, but relatively flat and brightly colored – frequently coral, but some varieties are available in various shades of pink. The blooms appear in profusion during the spring, but the plant will produce some blossoms throughout the summer. The shape and color attract butterflies, honey bees and more importantly, native bees. All of these insects are threatened by habitat loss and our overuse of insecticides that remain in the environment for weeks or even months.

Its leaves indicate just how well it can survive in this region. Like the leaves of most desert or desert-adapted plants, they are not large. Smaller leaves have less area to lose water through stomata (plant pores). They are also less likely to be shredded by the winds that can destroy larger, floppier leaves.

Another adaptation is the leaf color. At first glance, one might be tempted to call it grey, although this is not exactly correct. While the leaves themselves are green, they have a downy protective coat that makes them appear to be grey. The downy covering is the eye irritant we must respect. For the plant, however, this fuzziness serves as a shade, blocking blistering sunlight and decreasing some water loss. Being native to the Mojave Desert as well as other North American deserts, this is critical. Globe mallow protects itself even more.

If you look closely, you see that the leaves are not flat, but wavy with a scalloped edge. This change in shape lessens the area directly exposed to the sun, another essential adaptation for a desert denizen.

Since globe mallow will grow wild in the desert, one might be tempted to think it could grow in any garden, but that is not the case. It requires very good drainage, as in a sandy soil. Too much water around the root zone will kill it.

Modern varieties are available in many local nurseries and on-line distributors.

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