

## Leucophyllum

*Leucophyllum frutescens*



Although many of us in the gardening community believe they are overused, and too often butchered into balls and squares, Texas rangers (*Leucophyllum frutescens*) are reliable shrubs for Southern Nevada landscapes. Sometimes these bushes are called “Texas sage”, although they are not at all closely related to those plants. They are, however, nearer to snapdragons.

Another name for them is “barometer bush”, because it flowers during periods of higher humidity, or after rains. The flowers are mainly purple to lavender, although newer hybrids have white blossoms.

There are about a dozen species of *Leucophyllum*, but Texas Ranger is very familiar, used in home and commercial landscaping all over the region. It is no wonder. Not only are they attractive, but they thrive in our challenging desert environment. They are native to dry, hot parts of Texas and Mexico.

Anyone who has attempted to grow edibles or ornamentals in the great American Southwest knows that the climate can be problematic. High winds can shred large or floppy leaves. A mere four inches of rain (more or less) will only support highly drought tolerant plants. Summer temperatures over 110° and the intense desert sunlight will damage foliage and can kill tender plants.

Southern Nevada soils vary widely in their content of sand, silt and clay, but they are generally salty and alkaline. Salty soils can actually pull water out of roots; this is not at all what any gardener would like to see! Sometimes a salt can even interfere with the use of other nutrients, or cause “salt burn” on foliage.

At high pH (alkaline conditions), certain essential nutrients become unavailable. Most notable among these deficient nutrients are iron, manganese and zinc. When you see a plant whose leaves have green veins but pale tissue in between them, that is probably a lack of one of these three. The high pH is due in large part to the presence of much calcium carbonate in the soil. *Leucophyllum* flourishes in calcareous soil, and will suffer if planted in acidic conditions.

For a plant to survive all these challenges, it must have developed a large repertoire of techniques. Fortunately for our landscapes, Texas Ranger has quite a few. While its leaves are not tiny, they are relatively small, with fewer stomata. For this reason, they lose less water than larger leaves would. They are not flat; rather they are slightly folded, which also help to conserve water. The pubescent coating makes the leaves look grey, although they are green underneath the fuzz. This downy coat acts as a sunshade, protecting leaves from sun scald.

Its natural shape is flowing and rounded, so it does not need much shaping. In winter, it can be pruned nearly to the ground to rejuvenate it. It comes back healthier.

No matter how tough a shrub is, it can suffer or die if treated incorrectly. Overwatering, or planting in a poorly drained spot, will kill Texas Ranger. Just a very little bit of care will keep this attractive bush healthy for years.

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