University of Nevada
Cooperative Extension

Witches

Over the past several years, I am sure you have noticed that Halloween has morphed totally - from the single day when children could race home from school and change into some kind of fantasy or monster, with the task of collecting candy and cash from "unsuspecting" neighbors. At least, that is what I remember.

What we have now, though, is something more along the lines of a "Halloween season". Have you sent out your Halloween cards yet? Kids have to deal with getting the right costume; no more torn t-shirts and cheap makeup! No simple jack-o-lanterns, either. People buy patterns so they can carve headless horsemen into their pumpkins! Trees are festooned with many plastic dangling jack-o-lanterns, and front yards display spooky gravesites dripping with cobwebs. Doors and windows have whole tableaux with ghosts and skeletons, and of course, witches.

Witches hair

Witches broom

Witches broom

Witches are reputed to be scary individuals who try to do frightening things to children in fairy tales (and in the Land of Oz).

In horticulture, witches can be no less terrifying. Many, but not all, of the plants that have "witch" in their names are indeed villainous.

First, let me mention that there are some "good witches". Witch hazel (*Hamamelis*) is a yellow-flowered shrub that is used to produce a refreshing astringent. Unfortunately, it does not grow well in alkaline, salty, dry soils, so it is not a great choice for Nevada landscapes. An orchid found in North Carolina (*Ponthieva racemosa*) is known as "hairy shadow witch" but again, it is not ideal for our challenging climate. Witch alder (whose proper name is *Fothergilla garenii)* is a pretty shrub that might survive here, but it really prefers rich, well drained, acid soils. There is a floribunda rose called "Witching Hour" that might be worth trying.

Aside from these, and perhaps a couple of other "good witches", quite a few plants containing the word "witch" in the name are unwelcome, and many of them will indeed survive in the desert Southwest.

Some witch plants are grasses. Two members of the genus *Panicum* are "witch grass" (*P. capillare*) and "western witch grass" (*P. dichotomiflorum*). Even the noxious weed we commonly call "quack grass" or "couch grass" (*Agropyron repens*) is sometimes known as witch grass. Here is another good reason not to use common names if we have a choice; using proper names can lessen confusion.

We tend to think of witchy things as not too attractive (that is the whole "wicked witch of the west" thing) but that is not necessarily the case. *Hylotelephium telephium* is occasionally

called “witch’s moneybags”. This attractive probably **would** grow in this region, but it’s an invasive weed species listed by the USDA.

In parts of the world, including the eastern US, grows a genus of root parasites known as “witchweed” (*Striga).* This plant devastates the plants it encounters by sucking out its nutrients. So, indeed, parasitic plants can be attractive, as this one is, but that makes them perhaps even more terrible.

The Mojave’s difficult climate does not prevent the parasite, dodder (*Cuscuta),* from wreaking havoc. Anyone who has seen something that looks like a tangled mass of orange or yellow string sitting atop wild plants has seen dodder. Some people know this freeloader as “witch’s hair”, and others call it “witch’s shoelaces”.

Finally, there is something known as “witch’s broom”. This is not a plant, but actually a phenomenon. When certain parasitic plants (or other organisms) land on a limb, it can cause the plant to respond by wildly producing masses of twigs and foliage. The resulting cluster can look like the business end of an old broom. It is very common on evergreens in this region, but you can also find it on acacia and mesquite. Producing all that extra growth without getting any of the benefit really weakens a plant.

There are indeed many witches out there. Enjoy Halloween, but you do not want to bring these witch plants into the garden.

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