

Plant of the Month

Grindelia squarrosa – curlycup gumweed

Family: Asteraceae, sunflower family

Habit: Herb growing 10 - 100 cm tall; thick, leathery leaves oblong in shape, 3 - 7 cm long, teeth on the leaf margins minutely serrated to rounded; resinous floral cup (involucre) 6 - 11 mm high, the bract tips strongly bent backwards; 22- 36 ray petals—blooms from June to October.

Habitat: Dry, open places, often in sandy or rocky soil, 3,500 – 8,500 feet. Found on many Boulder County properties, including Heil Valley Ranch and Rock Creek Farm.



Grindelia squarrosa would be an easily identifiable plant in Boulder County if it weren't for a copycat in its midst. Another gumweed, *Grindelia subalpina* or subalpine gumweed, looks very similar and grows in the same areas as curlycup gumweed. The name subalpine gumweed is somewhat of a misnomer since most of its range is just below the subalpine zone (9,000 to 11,000 ft). The two species can be distinguished by the shape and spacing of the teeth along the leaf margin. The teeth of subalpine gumweed are sharply pointed and spaced further apart, while curlycup gumweed has smaller, generally rounded teeth that are closer together. Both species feature the characteristic sticky cup (involucre) that gives the plants the common name of gumweed.

The stickiness comes from a type of resin, which may aid moisture retention or be a defense mechanism against predation. The leaves also contain resin, tannins, bitter alkaloids, and glucosides, making them unpalatable to most herbivores. The plant has a strong scent that some describe as camphor or balsam-like. It has been used by Indigenous people and homeopathic practitioners for various purposes, including as a wash or salve for rashes, insect bites, and burns, and as a tea to treat coughs. Its extensive use even got it listed in the U.S. Pharmacopeia (compendium of recognized medicines) until it was replaced by synthetics in 1969.

Curlycup gumweed is a hardy species that can persist in drought and thrive in areas of disturbance, including roadsides and fields dominated by invasive species such as cheatgrass and crested wheatgrass. Its ability to grow in dry, rocky soil helps stabilize soil when conditions are too harsh for other plants, and the late-season blooms provide a critical pollinator food source.



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G. squarrosa – smaller teeth that are closer together



G. subalpina – larger, pointed teeth that are spaced further apart



Sources:

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