Plant of the Month

Atriplex canescens, four-wing saltbush

Family: Amaranthaceae, pigweed family

Habit: shrubs, mostly 3 – 6 ft tall, female and male flowers usually on separate plants (dioecious); leaves alternate, lacking leaf stalk, surface is scurfy, linear to spoon-shaped, 1-4 x .3-.8 cm, edges smooth; male flowers on unbranched inflorescences; fruit 8-25 mm long, on stalks 1-8 mm long with 4 conspicuous wings; wings entire to toothed; seeds 1.5-2.5 mm diameter.

Habitat: Dry slopes and plains, 3,800-8,800 ft. Blooms May-August.

Four-wing saltbush may not look like much, but it is full of surprises. While the species is primarily dioecious, this is not fixed; some plants will become monoecious - female and male flowers on the same plant. In one study conducted over 7 years, nearly 40% of plants in one population switched sexes, and 20% did so yearly. Female flowers (pistillate) have a greater probability of switching than male flowers (staminate), and changes are more likely to occur after drastic weather shifts such as a cold winter, severe drought, or an unusually productive fruiting season. Male plants tend to occupy harsh sites and do not grow as large and robust as female plants. Flowers are small, and it can be difficult to distinguish between male and female. The fruit persists on the shrub through the winter and indicates the plant is female. That is unless you found one of the uncommon monoecious plants. What a trickster!

Due to its ability to thrive in various soil types, withstand drought, and tolerate high salt content, it is frequently used in the reclamation of old mine sites and other disturbed areas. Its extensive root system makes it a great choice for erosion control. Four-wing saltbush is an excellent forage in the winter for elk, deer, and pronghorn. It also provides food and cover for birds, rabbits, and small mammals.

Trace minerals such as sodium, potassium, and magnesium primarily concentrate in the leaves. Some Indigenous people would use the sodium-rich leaves and seeds to add flavor to their foods. Also, the ashes from burned leaves create a type of soda ash similar to baking soda, which was used as a leavening agent for baking bread. Other uses included making a poultice from the leaves for insect bites and a dye binder from boiled leaves.

Photo by Ken Fern

Photos by Al Schneider

Sources:

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