

Plant of the Month

Mentzelia decapetala – ten-petal stickleaf

Family: Loasaceae, stickleaf family

Habit: biennials or perennials, 40 – 100 cm tall; leaves lance-shaped with deep lobes or wavy margins, 5-30 x 1.5-4.5 cm; petals 47-80 x 13-23 mm, white; stamens usually a golden yellow; fruit is a cylindric capsule, 3-5 cm x 13-18 mm; seeds 3 mm long, with a thin wing along the margin. Flowers July-September.

Habitat: shale slopes, grasslands, roadsides; 3,500-7,000 ft. It can be found on Boulder County properties such as Ron Stewart Preserve at Rabbit Mountain.



Mentzelia decapetala or ten-petal stickleaf often goes unnoticed because the flowers do not open until dusk and are closed by morning. The brilliant white petals stand out amongst the dark surroundings, signaling to night pollinators such as hawk moths that there is nectar to drink. Other pollinators, such as bees, beetles, and flies, also visit the flowers for nectar and pollen. A similar and more common species, *Mentzelia nuda* or bractless stickleaf, may be confused with ten-petal stickleaf. *M. nuda* has shorter petals (20-50 mm vs 47-80 mm), the stamens are white to pale yellow, and *M. nuda* does not typically grow as tall as *M. decapetala*.

Like most plants, there are many common names for *M. decapetala*, including chalk lily, candleflower, and ten-petal blazingstar or stickleaf. The name stickleaf refers to the sticky nature of the leaves. The leaf surface of *M. decapetala* and many other *Mentzelia* species are covered in a dense forest of short, stiff hairs that give a texture akin to sandpaper. The hairs act like Velcro and will stick to clothing and fur. The exact function of these hairs is not known, but they could be used to deter herbivory or to trap insects and use their decaying bodies as a source of nitrogen.

The deep taproot and preference for well-draining poor soils make ten-petal stickleaf a unique drought-tolerant addition to one's garden. It can be a biennial (takes 2 years to produce flowers, blooms once, then dies) or a short-lived perennial, but once established, it will produce new plants from seed for years to come. Not only would you be planting a native plant that requires little water and feeds nocturnal pollinators, but you would also have a floral performance in your very own yard!



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Sources:

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