

Plant of the Month

Argemone polyanthemus, crested prickly poppy

Family: *Papaveraceae*, poppy family

Habit: Annual to biennial plants from a taproot, 20-60 cm tall; stems densely to sparsely covered in yellow-tan prickles; leaves blue-green with a waxy, smooth surface except for the scattered prickles on the main leaf veins; flowers 5-10 cm wide with 6 to 12 overlapping white petals, center composed of up to 150 yellow stamens (male) that surround the red-purple 3-lobed pistil (female); stems and leaves exude a yellow sap when cut; blooms from June to August.

Habitat: Found in sandy soil, grasslands, and dry slopes; 3,700 – 8,000 ft. Can be found on numerous BCPOS properties, including along the Meadowlark Trail (Coalton Trailhead), Pella Crossing, and Betasso Preserve.



The large, delicate petals of *Argemone polyanthemus*, crested prickly poppy, are a stark contrast to the armored foliage and fruit. The flowers are a kind of peace offering to the insects that the poppy relies on for pollination. Beetles, bees, and butterflies visit the flowers for nectar and pollen, but the rest of the plant has an elaborate defense that deters herbivory. The leaves and stems contain a mixture of sap and latex that seeps from the tissue if broken or cut. When the latex is exposed to the air, it develops a sticky consistency that is not only unpalatable but can even bind the mouth parts of insects. If the spines and the sticky, acrid sap were not enough to deter prickly poppy from becoming a snack, all parts of the plant are toxic if ingested – just for good measure.

The genus *Argemone* is derived from the Greek word argema, which means “speckled eye.” The name was bestowed upon the plant because some species of *Argemone* were used to treat cataracts. Several species of prickly poppy have been used for a wide variety of things, including wart removal, fabric dye, and anesthetizing fish. *Polyanthemus* means “many flowers” and refers to the 150 + yellow stamens (floral male reproductive organs) at the center of the flower.

There are 30 species of *Argemone* native to the Americas, and 2 species of prickly poppy inhabit Boulder County: *A. polyanthemus* and *A. hispida*. *A. hispida*, rough prickly poppy, can be distinguished from crested prickly poppy by short, fine hairs on the leaf surface.



Photos by Al Schneider

Sources:

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