

garden variety

BY WYNN ANDERSON

Apache Plume: a feather in the wind



There are lots of plants with pretty flowers, followed by messy seed litter. Of course, you can always “deadhead” many plants—removing the spent flower before seeds have time to form, picking them off by hand or cutting with snips or shears. This can be considerable work and, in cases when you are fortunate enough to have a long-blooming plant, difficult to keep up without also cutting off the emerging flower buds.

There are exceptions, however, and El Paso is fortunate to have one growing wild on the gravelly slopes of the Franklin Mountains and lining the sides of the many dry arroyos that meander out into the desert bolson flats. It is a wonderful, long-blooming, thornless, cold-hardy and drought-tolerant evergreen shrub with a pleasing rounded form, beautiful white flowers and strikingly attractive seeds that, when fully ripe, drift away on the wind. What more could you ask?

I am talking about Apache Plume, better known to botanists and the nursery professionals as *Fallugia paradoxa*. A desert-dwelling member of the Rose Family, this often overlooked shrub sports numerous attractive, quarter-to-fifty-cent-sized, five-petaled blossoms on solitary stems that resemble miniature white roses when open. The flowers are accented by dark green foliage on upright branching stems with peeling, silvery-gray bark. The small, inch-long leaves, dark green above and felty white underneath, are deeply divided into three-to-seven finger-like lobes and, being semi-deciduous, will persist in milder

winters. The plant can flower from May to December but provides its best show during the hot summer months of June, July and August.

This is just the beginning of the show, however. It is the fluffy clusters of seed heads that develop from each successfully insect-pollinated flower that give this desert shrub, found from the Northern Chihuahuan Desert of Mexico and West Texas across the Southwest to Nevada and California, its name and a special place in any xeriscape. The ball-like cluster of feathery plumes resembles the feathered headdress of an Indian chieftain and that is what led to its common name, Apache Plume.

A single flower produces numerous small, oval, individual seeds called achenes. Each one is tipped with a slender, silvery, feather-like tail up to two inches long that is often tinged pale to rose pink and even purplish in color, especially when young. As the seeds mature, the tail fades to silver gray and finally lifts the ripe achene from the cluster and carries it away on the wind. While quite an effective seed dispersal strategy in windy southwestern deserts, those clustered plumes are also very attractive in the landscape, especially when backlit by morning sunlight that sets the hundreds of tiny bristles lining every feathery tail aglow.

Use *Fallugia paradoxa* in the transition zone of your xeriscape. It is particularly effective at anchoring and naturalizing portions of the simulated gravel washes or drainages so popular in El Paso rockscapes. It can also form an effective, tight barrier hedge and its ability to sprout new stems from underground rhizomes makes it good for erosion control on dry hot banks.

Place Apache Plume in full sun, where it has room to grow in almost any soil, provided it drains well. In the wild where it is dependent on extra moisture captured along arroyo banks following our sparse rains, this plant can look pretty scraggly at times. In your garden, if given regular supplemental irrigation in the drier and hotter times of the year, it will form a tidy mounded or clumping shape up to five feet high and wide. Older plants spread slowly by woody underground rhizomes so that in excessively irrigated settings, the plant may spread up to eight feet or more.

The new shoots are few and easily removed by hand but using efficient irrigation systems with drip emitters will help confine the plant to the intended irrigated area. Orderly by nature, pruning is seldom needed unless used for hedging; but when necessary, the plant responds better to shearing than hard cutback.

Apache Plume is commercially grown by major southwestern wholesale growers. If not in stock, don't take no for an answer; insist that your favorite retail nursery order this excellent El Paso shrub for you.

Wynn Anderson is the Botanical Curator for the Chihuahuan Desert Gardens at UTEP's Centennial Museum. Anderson can be reached at wanderson@utep.edu