

Sahara Mustard No Ordinary Weed

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Sahara Mustard (*Brassica tourneforti*) is commonly known as African Mustard, Asian Mustard or Wild Turnip and is a member of the mustard family.



It is a native of North Africa, the Middle East and the Mediterranean and was first discovered in California in 1927. It is believed to have been introduced here in the 1900's from date palms that had been imported into the California Coachella Valley from the Middle East.

The plant has now spread into the states of Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. It inhabits low elevation areas below 3,300 feet elevation. It thrives in sandy or gravelly soils, beaches, dunes and disturbed roadsides.

This is no ordinary weed and is very destructive. An early bloomer (December/January), it grows quickly, The plant steals resources such as water and

nutrients around it from native plants. It will smother wildflowers such as lupine, poppies and verbena along with native plants such as creosote bush.

The plant also has high oxalic content so it may be toxic to desert tortoises.



Identifying Sahara Mustard is easy. Some think it is a wildflower because of the yellow flowers it produces, but don't be fooled. Sahara Mustard is an erect annual that can grow from 4 to 40 inches tall.

The stems branch from the base of the plant and have rough, stinging hairs that can be hurtful if touched (it is not poisonous like scorpion weed and will not leave a rash). When the leaves are crushed they smell like cabbage or turnips.



The basal rosette of the leaves can be 3 to 12 inches long and look like that of a dandelion plant. The leaves get smaller as they grow up the stem.

The flowers are small, less than a quarter of an inch, with four oblong yellow petals in the shape of an X. The flower turns into a fruit, which is a narrow seed capsule that breaks open when mature and disperses seeds.

The seeds are tiny and reddish brown. The mucilaginous coating on the seeds makes them both sticky when wet and waterproofs them. This is what allows the seeds to survive in dormant conditions up to two months or under water for tow months.

One well-developed plant can produce between 750 to 9,000 seeds. Dried plants that pull up and travel like tumbleweeds disperse the seeds.

Once established, the plants move into wild land areas and sand dunes at an aggressive pace. It is imperative that further establishment of this weed be prevented and that existing plants be eradicated.

Experiments to find effective ways to control Sahara Mustard are ongoing. The best control is prevention and the best prevention is manual pulling of the plant prior to it's going to seed.

Minimizing soil disturbance is another way. Planned burning is not effective due to the plant's close relationship to crops in the mustard family such as broccoli, cauliflower and brussel sprouts. Chemical control is being studied and is inconclusive since Sahara Mustard is considered resistant to Group B herbicides.

Sahara Mustard is now on control strategies in several states and is on red flag alert here in Arizona. Sahara Mustard has been observed here in Lake Havasu City, so if you see it on your property, pull it. However, removing any plants from BLM or State Park properties is illegal.

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