



# Lingering Lushness - Late Summer Wildflowers

By Vince Pinto

We hit the monsoon jackpot this year, as evidenced by our rather ostentatious display of native flowers. While the Sky Islands and the adjoining Chihuahuan and Sonoran deserts are all rightly acclaimed for their spring floral fireworks, it is summer's show that we can most depend upon each year.

Spring wildflowers are mostly annuals and biennials that live and die predominantly within the narrow confines of our usually brief verdant spring. The vast majority of those species will never appear at this time of year. In contrast, our monsoon wildflowers are mainly perennials that are likely to appear every year.

With most summer blossoms it seems the only variable is magnitude, not presence or absence, as is often the case with their spring counterparts.

September normally sees a shift from the earlier monsoon bloomers to those that have evolved to make use of the latter part of the monsoons. A few lingering orange saiya (*Amoreuxia palmatifida*) lie atop clay-bound hills. There they demand attention—as the flower corolla (the combined petals) may span several inches, framed by the comely, palmate-lobed leaves. The latter are normally about half green and half pinkish-purple, reminding the

curious naturalist to look well beyond the obvious floral exuberance. Throw in that the entire plant is delectable to the discerning palate and you have ample reason to pause at this summer sensation.

You might well confuse the rather uncommon Saiya with the generally ubiquitous summer poppy (a misnomer). While Saiya has an irregular large flower and palmate leaves, summer *Caltrop* has a more symmetrical bloom of up to about an inch across. Summer *Caltrops* collectively transform the better part of many local hills into a sea of orange in mid-to-late summer. Interestingly, they are in the same family as our familiar creosote bush.

Sacred datura (*Datura wrightii*) continues to proffer its behemoth white funnel-shaped flowers. The flowers of this highly toxic member of the nightshade family are hard to

miss, although they usually open from dusk till dawn. We are fortunate to behold the fragrant blossoms when, teased forth by a humid and overcast monsoon day, they continue to open throughout the daylight hours. Nocturnal Lepidopterans, such as the various sphinx moths, are their main pollinators. Another white-flowered and tubular monsoon species, *Macrosiphonia*, which wafts its deeply perfumed aroma throughout the hill-sides and gullies, is mala mujer (*Cnidoscolus angustidens*), a stinging member of the spurge family.

Also look for bird's foot morning glory, whose flowers are a rich pink. If any one floral group can lay claim to late monsoon season, it is the morning glories. They climb up and over anything in their path and sprawl across the ground when denied vertical opportunities.

Other monsoon bloomers include magenta trailing windmills (*Allonia incarnata*), blue and white silverleaf morning glory, white and pink buckwheats (*Eriogonum spp.*), yellow catclaw acacia (*Acacia greggii*), pink (*Mimosa dysocarpa*) and white (*M. biuncifera*) Catclaw mimosas, and yellow trumpets (*Tecoma stans*)—to name but a few. Enjoy! Vincent Pinto and his wife, Claudia, run Raven's Way Wild Journeys. They offer local tours dedicated to the preservation of the incredible biodiversity in the Sky Islands.

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