

# The Weekly Plant

## 20 July 2014

**Common names:** Texas ranger, Chihuahuan rain sage, Texas sage, barometer bush, silverleaf, cenizo

**Scientific name:** *Leucophyllum*,<sup>1</sup> species and cultivars

**TAV location:** Between swimming pool and community building

### Discussion

You'll notice them everywhere during monsoon - in road medians, in commercial developments, perhaps in your neighbor's yard. Their bright flowers in purples and blues (even pinks and white) are striking. You'll see even more plants in bloom as monsoon progresses.

There are several species of Texas ranger used in desert landscaping<sup>2</sup>. All of them are native to the Chihuahuan Desert in Mexico; a few are native to Texas and New Mexico. They are prized for their evergreen silver-grey to green foliage; their showy flowers; and their tolerance of drought, heat, and cold.

The leaves of Texas ranger are alternate and simple, no more than an inch long, often smaller. They are covered with fine hairs that reflect the sun's rays and reduce water loss. These hairs also influence the leaf's color - more hairs results in a whiter leaf; less hairs, a greener leaf.



The summer flowering pattern of Texas ranger gives rise to the common names "rain sage" (even though it is not a sage) and "barometer bush". Flowering can begin as early as May but really takes off once monsoon humidity arrives. The flowers have 5 petals that are fused into a tube. The tube flairs at the end, with two petals up and three petals down. The flowers are often fragrant and attractive to bees. If you want to add one of these plants to your yard, you have the luxury of choosing from a variety of flower colors, leaf colors, and plant sizes (3' x 3' to 10' x 10').

All of the Texas rangers can tolerate temperatures down to 10°F. They are also heat-loving and thrive in our summers, even if planted against a west-facing wall. The one thing these plants cannot tolerate is poor drainage. You may think this can't occur in the desert, but low spots where water stands

and high-clay soils that occur in such sites are death to these plants. Never plant Texas ranger in these areas - it will rot. Once the plant is established, water deeply but infrequently and minimally, if at all, in winter. These plants might very well survive on natural rainfall or at most widely-spaced waterings during the hottest months.

It is quite common to see Texas rangers sheared into balls, cubes, polyhedrons, just about any shape except the plant's natural one (pay attention as you drive around town). This is a shame since all varieties of Texas rangers develop a pleasing form all on their own. Even worse, if this shearing is done at the wrong time, the flower buds will be cut off. At best, this shortens the new growth so only a few flowers form; at worst, it leaves you flowerless.

Because flowers are only produced on the new shoots that grow each spring, prune Texas rangers only in their off-season - in fall after flowering ceases to early spring before new growth begins. If the form of the plant pleases you, there is no reason to ever prune these plants. However, if the plant is encroaching on a walkway, prune as needed even though it may mean cutting off flower buds.



<sup>1</sup> Tropicos is the source of the currently accepted scientific name: <http://www.tropicos.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Leucophyllum candidum* (violet silverleaf), *Leucophyllum frutescens* (Texas ranger, cenizo), *Leucophyllum laevigatum* (Chihuahuan rain sage), *Leucophyllum langmaniae* (Cimmaron sage), *Leucophyllum minus* (Big Bend silverleaf), *Leucophyllum pruinatum* (fragrant rain sage), *Leucophyllum zygophyllum* (blue rain sage).

*Above left: flowers. Note spots that act as bee guides and tubular shape of flower. Left: a new shoot that grew this year. Note flower buds above open flower (arrows). If this shoot had been cut back, those buds would have been lost. Right: Texas ranger too close to sidewalk. The side of the plant was sheared and has very few flowers. The top was not sheared and has many new stems with flowers.*