

# Sky's the Limit - The Flora

By  
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Here at Sky's the Limit we are on an alluvial fan of material washed down from the mountains south of us. We are at an elevation of 2800 feet, standing on alluvial soil of coarse decomposed granite mixed with finer soils. The soil varies from rocky slopes to sandy washes and supports a community of plants adapted to the harsh desert conditions. These plants are adapted to an environment of little rainfall, intense sunlight, temperature extremes, low humidity and drying winds.

The plants you see around you are part of the creosote bush scrub plant community. You can see that the Creosote Bush is the dominant shrub here. It is widespread throughout the Mojave and Colorado Desert at elevations below 3500 feet. Generally, companion shrubs include the Burrobush and Krameria. In some areas, these 3 make up the majority. But here, there is a broad variety of shrubs, vines and grasses.

Perennial shrubs include the Mojave Yucca, Jojoba, Cat's-claw Acacia, Desert Senna, Paper-bag Bush, Cheesebush, Spiny Menodora and Bladderpod.

Cacti include the Golden Cholla, Pencil Cholla, Pancake Cactus, Barrel, Foxtail, Calico and Fishhook.

A couple vines are prominent. Brandegia is a bright green vine that grows over shrubs for support. The Coyote Melon, especially noticeable after summer rain, spreads many arms radiating from a common point where the main stem emerges from a large tuberous root. It has large, orange flowers and green gourds the size of large oranges.

An important grass growing here is the Galletta Grass. It is eaten by many herbivores including big horn sheep, the desert tortoise and many rodents and insects.

Some of the trees and shrubs of the Colorado Desert are found here. Desert Lavender, Jojoba, and California Trixis have their northern extension here in this transition zone between the two deserts.

How do these plants survive? They are all adapted to the harsh desert conditions. Leaves are very small and have surfaces that reduce water-loss. The leaves may be waxy, hairy, leathery, or there may be no leaves as with the Desert Tea and Cactus. The cactus has spines that shade and protect it from animals that would like to eat it. Some plants, such as the Desert Senna or Ocotillo, can drop their leaves under drought conditions.

The annual wildflowers bloom in two seasons. They take advantage of just the right amount of rain to germinate, grow, bloom and produce seed. Usually, a ¼ inch of rain will be enough for some to germinate. Others need a little more. For the winter annuals to be prolific and large in size, a series of rains coming at just the right intervals from October through February is necessary. The plants germinate in the fall and remain small and close to the ground as their root systems develop. Then, in March, they begin to bloom.

The first annuals to bloom are the Forget-Me-Nots, Comb-burs, Fiddleneck and a couple mustard species (Tansy Mustard and Cooper's Caulanthus). The flowers of these plants are very small and may go unnoticed by most people. You really notice the wildflowers when the showy ones begin the bloom. The Fremont Pincushion with its head of white disc flowers and Desert Dandelion with yellow flowers made up entirely of ray flowers can be abundant. Others include Chia, Woody Bottle Washer, Coreopsis and Desert Chicory. Low to the ground are the Desert Star and Wallace's Woolly Daisy. Last to bloom is the Desert Woolstar with its light blue flowers. One of the first shrubs to bloom is the Turpentine Broom, a citrus relative with purple flowers. More visible is the Bladder Pod with its yellow flowers and green pods. The Bladder Pod can have flowers almost anytime of the year. By April, most of the perennial shrubs are blooming.

The Beavertail is the first cactus to bloom, followed by the Hedgehog Cactus, Golden Cholla, Barrel Cactus and Foxtail Cactus. Pencil Cholla blooms in the summer.

By May, the Indigo Bush will be covered with deep royal blue flowers. The Desert Senna will stand out with its flowers of bright yellow. Later, in June, the Smoke Trees in the large wash west of Utah Trail will burst out with bluish-violet flowers. The last perennial to bloom is the Dead Cactus. Up in Queen Valley where it flourishes, it blooms for a couple weeks following the summer solstice.

There are other annuals that only germinate when the ground is warm. These are the ones that come up after a heavy summer thunderstorm and bloom in August and September. Chinch Weed, Boerhavia and Windmills are a few. The Coyote Melon also responds with new growth and large orange flowers.

If summer rains are substantial, many of the shrubs bloom again in the fall.