

## Why Doesn't Everyone Love Rabbitbrush?

by Cindy Murray



### Photo captions

1. Although rabbitbrush is quick to take over disturbed plots of land like those graded for construction, it is native and non-invasive. Mowing unwanted seedlings will be sufficient to control its growth.
2. In the fall, rabbitbrush makes great forage for both honey bees and native pollinators.

In August, nine regional businesses and homeowners publicly showcased their gardens and landscapes for the Coconino Master Gardeners' annual tour. This year Hugh and I were honored to host our home garden and landscape. Aside from our thirsty vegetable gardens and fruit trees, we have designed our landscape as a refuge for migrant and resident birds and beneficial arthropods. We have also steered towards the concept of xeriscaping, meaning that we try to conserve water by planting drought-resistant plants. But by no means does our yard look like a desert.

Our guests were delightful; some had no gardening experience, while others seemed to be experts, but all were inquisitive. They asked questions and shared knowledge with our wonderful Master Garden volunteers, my husband Hugh, and myself. One guest who had been admiring our rabbitbrush inquired: "Why doesn't everyone love rabbitbrush?"

Although I had seen rabbitbrush throughout much of the Southwest, I didn't know its name until I moved into the Flagstaff region. Coconino County is home to not only several different species of rabbitbrush but two separate genera as well—*Ericameria* and *Chrysothamnus*. Some types of rubber rabbitbrush (*Ericameria nauseosa*) formerly named *Chrysothamnus nauseosus*, grows as tall as seven feet, while our diminutive longflower rabbitbrush (*Chrysothamnus depressus*) rarely reaches over a foot and a half. Arizona rabbitbrush (*Chrysothamnus molestus*) is even smaller at less than a foot in height, and may be differentiated from other species by its 2mm wide, hairy leaves. Arizona rabbitbrush grows only in Coconino County, inhabiting pinyon-juniper grasslands rooted in limestone-derived soils. *Chrysothamnus viscidiflorus*, another species that goes by the name green rabbitbrush (also called yellow rabbitbrush,) attains a lofty height of five feet.

As for why people don't want rabbitbrush on their property, I think the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service explains it best, saying, "Although rubber rabbitbrush may appear to dominate a plant community soon after disturbance, [such as an overgrazed field, over-cultivated land, and areas of recent construction] it is not overly competitive and is eventually replaced with other vegetation as the [plant] community matures." The U.S. Forest Service advises, "Though [rabbitbrush] can appear as a weedy monoculture (especially following disturbances) they are early colonizers and their presence can be reduced under improved management regimes."

Personally, I love rabbitbrush. In point of fact, I eagerly await our region's autumn tableaux of rabbitbrush: large expanses of gold or sulfur-yellow, feathery clusters of flowers atop shrubby mounds of slender, intricate branches holding linear leaves. My own property hosts at least two kinds: one I believe is the gray form of rubber rabbitbrush (*Ericameria nauseosa subsp. nauseosa*). I surmise the other is the green form (*Ericameria nauseosa subsp. consimilis*), because the gray form, of course, has gray foliage and the green form has green. And, as described in the literature, my gray form grows taller than my green form.

Many Northern Arizona gardeners make rabbitbrush central components in their xeriscaping, as Hugh and I do. Below, I will share some of its wonderful attributes.

All species of rabbitbrush are extremely drought tolerant. Some of my specimens never receive irrigation; these however, usually have shorter lifespans. On the other hand, this comely shrub reseeds itself generously. We can count on several seedlings popping up each season, and we simply mow down any that are unwanted. And while rabbitbrush is generally low maintenance, we do chop down those specimens that perish, seeing that their dry skeletons are unsightly and may become fire hazards.

I love this native's sprightly gold flowers that light up any landscape just as most summer flowers are fading. We have never fertilized our rabbitbrush, since our native soil holds plenty of nutrients to keep them all hardy and attractive. My neighborhood, like much of Northern Arizona, abounds with blooming rabbitbrush through autumn, and bees and other pollinators that would otherwise scarcely find pollen and nectar for winter adore it. This plant also makes good browse for deer, pronghorn, and elk, while providing shelter for birds and small mammals.

By winter our rabbitbrush will garnish itself in tan, fluffy seedheads that will serve as a lovely textural backdrop against expansive meadows of white snow. This is yet another reason why everyone should love rabbitbrush.

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