



GET TO KNOW THE PLATEAU

Hopi Tea Greenthread *Thelesperma megapotamicum*

Habitat & Ecology

Thelesperma megapotamicum is a native plant distributed among the Colorado Plateau, Dine (Navajo) Nation, Pueblo Lands, and beyond. It prefers clay rich soil from Wyoming to Mexico and even South America. On the Plateau however, like in Chaco Canyon National Historical Park, green thread can grow straight out of the sand. It also is fond of disturbed areas and can be found from 1,200-2,500 meters (4,000-8,000 ft) in elevation. It is common to see on mesa tops, edges of gullies and on secondary roads. It can be grown to assist with restoration of prairie and grassland ecosystems. It is pollinated by insects, bees, moths and butterflies. The seeds are of benefit to visiting small mammals like rodents or birds that are granivorous (feeds on seed).

Description

Thelesperma megapotamicum is a deeply rooted perennial with a smooth glaucous, blueish to greenish stems. Along the stem grows opposite long and thin leaves. The plant is monoecious, having both reproductive organs, showing gold flower heads usually between July-October. As a sunflower family (*Asteraceae*) member, the flowers are a compact disc floret with a diameter of about 1.3 cm (.5 in) wide. The flower is located at the peduncle, the stalk that joins the base of the solitary flower to the main stem. Flowers fade from their golden hue to brown with age.

Conservation Status and Threats

The state of Utah has listed it as Critically Imperiled.

Similar Species

Four related and very similar species occur in Arizona and Utah, and six total in New Mexico. *Thelesperma subnubum* (Navajo Tea) is one on the plateau that is smaller in size. Also, as with many common names, the terms Hopi and Navajo teas are often associated with multiple species of *Thelesperma*.



T. megapotamicum/Max Licher CC BY-NC

Of Note

Thelesperma megapotamicum has an abundance of Ethnobotanical value. Its leaves, stalks, and flowers are used as a hot beverage and medicinal remedy by many tribal nations such as Dine (called Ch'il ahwééh), Hopi (Hohoyisi), Apache (Izeets'ósé), and more. Its flavor is described as slightly smoky, non-bitter and pleasant. The plant was collected in flower, tied in uniform bundles, then hung to dry and utilized in winter. Another traditional use is as a dye for baskets, and materials made from cotton and wool. The pigment from the yellowish flower produces a red to orangish hue provided by a flavonoid called luteolin. Greenthread is becoming a more recognized plant of importance in communities being seen sold at farmers market, used in carbonated beverages, and propagated into garden landscapes.

References

- Dunmire, William W. and Gail D. Tierney. 1997. Wild Plants & Native Peoples of the Four Corners. pp. 256-257.
- Heil, Kenneth D., Steve L. O'Kane Jr., Linda Mary Reeves. Arnold Clifford. 2013. Flora of the Four Corners Region. pp.305-306.
- Kane, Charles. 2011. Medicinal Plants of the American Southwest. pp. 147-148.

Written by Ashley Doyle



Close-up of *T. megapotamicum*/Zoya Akulova CC BY-NC