

BRITTLEBUSH

Dorland Mountain hosts beauty year round; from the plants and creatures that call it home, to you, the Artist Residents, who bring unique energy and vitality to the setting; even after you leave, your presence, that extraordinary drive to create, to be who you are, and do what you do, stays in the space, lingering as an extra effervescence, something that one of Dorland's original Artist Residents, Robert Willis, might call, 'enchantment,' it is that great sensation, along with the sights and sounds of nature that make Dorland Mountain Arts a place to come to nurture the magic within.

While at Dorland, if you were to paint, photograph, or describe in prose, lyric, song... the mountain's silver-gray-green ground-cover with the happiest of yellow petaled flowers blooming brightly nearly year-round, your art would be a portrait of a perennial, the Brittlebush, a principle of Dorland's backdrop.

Brittlebush is a native plant growing with ease in the chaparral below the elevation of 3500'. A chaparral biome, like that of Dorland Mountain, is attractive to plants that enjoy mild winters and low-moisture summers. Plants like yucca and sage, wild buckwheat and scrub oak grow along with brittlebush and creosote.



'Creosotebush Scrub,' (places where the landscape is dominated by creosote bushes), are quickly converted to 'Brittlebush Scrub' after fires, it takes the creosote much longer to recover.

The burned brittlebush plants usually die completely. But post-fire, nearby seeds of this prolific plant are often quick to waft along and take hold in the charred soil and will grow well, the first, magic, splash of color, in the blackened aftermath.

The light green leaves of the brittlebush range in size from 1¼" to 4" long. They appear to be silvery-gray in color because of tiny hair-like fuzz that protect the surface from sunburn. The dryer and hotter the weather, the smaller the leaves and the denser the leaf-fuzz, so in a very dry year, the brittlebush might look white in color or might even appear dead. If a drought takes hold for a long period of time, the plants will forgo flowering and will even drop their leaves; they will do what it takes to survive.

Brittlebush is allelopathic. (Not a very nice nickname).

According to Chambers Dictionary, 'allelopathy' is a noun that means:

An adverse influence exerted either by one individual plant over another by the production of a chemical inhibitor, or by one strain over another of the same species. Fr: alle'lopathie, from Gr: allelos - each other, and pathos - suffering (Please pass the Kleenex).

So, a brittlebush can inhibit the growth of other plants around it especially during the rainy season when seeds of other plants might be vying for a place to grow. That explains why the beautiful sea of yellow atop silver greenery is often without other colors interspersed. Thankfully, there is plenty of land at Dorland for everything to grow colorfully and with peaceful solitude.



Brittlebush reproduces asexually, by seed distribution, and can also reproduce by vegetative propagation (by sprouting from its root crown).

But be careful, Brittlebush, if you crowd yourself, there will be too many of you and not enough nutrients in the soil, or worse, not enough water.

Water is, as always, involved in a precarious balancing act. Since the leaves of the brittlebush will absorb moisture to lethal saturation, overwatering is bad. Frost is bad. Extreme heat, also, bad. The plants often grow in sloped, rocky hillsides where drainage is good and have adapted to take hold in gullies and sandy, alluvial fans where water concentrates during seasonal rainfall. Moisture is more safely stored from the roots up. An established plant will generally have one 'tap' root and a mass of shallow, clinging roots.

Brittlebush is a drought resistant native, grows from seed very quickly, is easy to transplant and will spread itself along rocky and sandy soil, so it's no wonder that it is one of the top choices for erosion control, is found in hydroseeding mixes, and is used for landscape rehabilitation. Plus, it is a very pretty plant!

Brittlebush, *encelia farinose*, is in the sunflower family. Its flowers, several dozen per shrub, are recognizably daisy-like, grow on thin, green stems. Rising above their shrubbery, they create a beautiful, living bouquet. The plant is a rounded shrub usually about 1 to 3 feet both in height and width but older plants can get to 5' tall. Brittlebush (barring fire or other deadly force) have been known to live to see their 30th birthday!

The plants flower when water conditions are comfortably balanced; some years, they'll flower from January through November. As you well know, for the past few years, rain has not followed a 'normal' schedule

in Southern California. The brittlebushes of the desert and the chaparral of Dorland Mountain are resilient and it's a good thing that they are as they are a huge benefit to the world around them.

Brittlebush got its name because its woody stalks and branches snap free fairly easily. But why would someone be drawn to snapping a branch off of a brittlebush? Well, as it turns out, the branches are one of the plant's many features that have been crucial to supporting a healthy environment for centuries.

Let's talk first about the birds and the bees, butterflies and woodrats, mantises (praying, and otherwise), hummingbirds, bats, flies, grasshoppers, mule deer, desert big horn sheep, mountain lions, coyotes, foxes, rabbits, owls, and, of course, beetles, aphids, ants, and mites... but not necessarily in that order.



Aphids, ants and mites, (the little things), find moisture and nutrition on the leaves of brittlebush and so do grasshoppers. Mantises and the like, really enjoy snacking on the little things. You know where I'm going with this. Owls love a fat grasshopper and will go for seconds if you're serving well-fed mantis. Bats, too, find nutrition flitting around a brittlebush.



The woody stalks of the plant afford shelter for nesting birds. And woodrats, rabbits, and burrowing owls locate to groves of brittlebush shrubs where in-ground dwellings are more secure. Fox, coyotes, mountain lions, and others look for prey near and in the shrubbery.

And the flowers! Though the plant does not require pollinators for reproduction, it appreciates the attention. The sunny yellow flowers attract and provide nutrients for all the regular customers.



Butterflies, bees, hummingbirds and beetles come for the nectar, and the seeds are a treat for song birds. Research has shown that woodrats will eat the seeds if that's all there is, but they prefer other seeds, fruit, acorns, leaves, flower buds, and your granola (please don't share).

Brittlebush is eaten by wild browsers like mule deer and desert big horn sheep. And though brittlebush is a nutritious, non-toxic plant that grows in abundance, wild horses and domestic cows don't seem to be interested.

To me, brittlebush sap smells like a sweet mix of musty rosemary, forest floor, and orange peel. It's actually way more pleasant than my description. In fact, the very reason that people have been snapping branches off of brittlebushes is to get to the sap.

Dried sap (resin) can be burned like incense (they say it smells like frankincense). Historically, the Spanish missionaries used brittlebush resin as a substitute for frankincense.

It was used in Mexico by the Seri Indians for tooth care. They took the dried sap and ground it up to make a paste like toothpaste. This paste would also be heated up and used topically to relieve pain.

The stems of brittlebush can be used as a toothbrush and in bundles, like sage, as a wand for smudging, leaving a room smelling clean and feeling calm.

American Indians used the sap as gum and candy, and also for waterproofing, paint, varnish, fuel, and as a glue to affix arrowheads to shafts.

Brittlebush is one of the most common plants that you'll see growing in deserts and chaparral. It grows plentifully at Dorland, and with proper drainage, it is a wonderful choice if you are looking for a hearty, drought resistant, flowering perennial for your garden at home. The leaves stay fragrant, fuzzy, and silvery-green all year long. The long-lasting sunny-faced flowers are great for flower arrangements.

During the fall, about every three years, garden brittlebushes like to be pruned back. You can cut them down to about 6" – 8" but, (to help ensure its recovery), water the trimmed plant well.

When planning your planting, remember that the brittlebush leaves are sun-sensitive so help to keep them from burning by placing your plants where they'll get a gentle, full-sun morning.

From the tiny fuzz on its brittlebush leaves to its expansive, sky-wide sunsets, Dorland Mountain is a place where an array of nature thrives, it's a place where your creativity meets free-time, and the sights, sounds, and scents of this place set forth a gift of possibilities to nurture your magic within.