

# Native Plants of Deer Canyon Preserve

## Prairie zinnia: July 2011



The small, but abundant yellow-gold blossoms of prairie zinnia decorate many of the roadsides and other open areas of the Preserve during our summer months. This hardy perennial stands up very well to sun, heat, and dry conditions and doesn't seem to have been adversely affected by the extreme drought conditions we endured earlier this year. Perhaps because of its reliability, this species has acquired many common names including plains zinnia, wild zinnia, desert zinnia, Rocky Mountain zinnia, paper flower, yellow zinnia, and little golden zinnia. Its scientific name is *Zinnia grandiflora*, one of two native species of *Zinnia* in New Mexico. Classified in the family Asteraceae, the genus *Zinnia* is named for Johann Gottfried Zinn (1727 - 1759), a German botanist, professor of medicine, and director of the Gottingen Botanical Gardens. Zinn collected *Zinnia* seeds in Mexico that proved to be the breeding stock for our ornamental garden *Zinnia* varieties. The species epithet comes from two Latin words; *grandis*, meaning large or abundant, and *flos*, meaning flower. So *grandiflora* can mean either large

flowered, or many flowered and in the case of *Zinnia grandiflora*, the latter meaning is certainly more appropriate.



Prairie zinnia is a slow growing, long-lived herbaceous perennial. Individual plants only grow to about eight inches tall and up to 15 inches wide. The root system consists of a long taproot and branching rhizomes, so over time an individual plant may produce a rather dense colony. Plants produce many branches from a somewhat woody base. Each branch is covered with short, stiff hairs and bears many thin, needle-like leaves in an opposite arrangement along its entire length. A single leaf grows to about one inch in length, has three veins, and is a light green color.

Flowers are produced at the end of a branch from June through September. Each flower head has only 3 - 6 yellow ray flowers with round to ovate petals, forming a flower head usually from 1 - 1 ½ inches across. The head contains relatively few orange disk flowers that protrude above the plane of the ray flowers. The base of the floral head is cylindrical to bell-shaped and about 3/8" high. It is covered with overlapping green leaf-like "phyllaries" that lie flat and have rounded tips. As the small dry fruits develop, the petals of the ray flowers persist turning brown and papery.



Native peoples have used prairie zinnia for both medicinal and decorative purposes. Navajos used a decoction of the plant to treat stomachaches and heartburn as well as nose and throat problems. A cold infusion of flowers was used as eyewash by Zunis and prairie zinnias were also an ingredient in sweat baths for treating fevers. The Keres prepared a yellow dye from the flowers that was used to tint wool and buckskin. In addition, ground flowers were used in the preparation of dark red body paint. Even if you are not interested in making a dye from prairie zinnia flowers, I suggest you consider this species in your landscaping plans. It is a nice choice for a colorful ground cover or as a low garden border and it doesn't require much attention. Whether you have prairie zinnia planted in your garden or happen across it as you wander the Preserve, you can always rely on its cheerful golden blooms to lift your spirits.