

The Weekly Plant

17 March 2015

Common names: blue or pale gilia, blue trumpets, long-flowered gilly, long-flowered skyrocket

Scientific name: *Ipomopsis longiflora*

TAV location: across the street from vacant lot 180, behind the two yellow and black barber poles.

Discussion

I've wanted to write about blue gilia for several years now but could never catch it flowering in an easily-accessible location. I'm seeing them many places this year, even one or two in my own yard. I hope they will reseed and return for years to come.

Blue gilia is one of our most delicate wildflowers. Its stem and leaves are so thin the plant is almost invisible unless in flower. Because the flowers are long and slender, they move in even the most gentle breeze. It is an annual, sometimes a biennial, that can flower even in the summer if rains are sufficient.

The flowers have 5 petals, fused into a thin tube for most of their length, that flair at the end (see photo upper right). This gives rise to the common name of "blue trumpets". The long thin tube - 2" or more in length - is referenced in the scientific name: "*longiflora*". The flowers are pollinated by late-flying moths (for photo of a sphinx moth on blue gilia see here: <http://shallowsky.com/blog/nature/sphinxmoths.html>).

Blue gilia is in the phlox family (Polemoniaceae). Many of the flowers in this family have trumpet-shaped flowers, usually with a shorter tube than the one found on this plant. Another characteristic is that the 5 petals are often swirled in bud as shown in photo at lower left. As the tube expands, the petals untwist until they flair almost perpendicular to the tube. The style, a part of the female sexual parts of the flower, is very long. It must reach from the base of the flower to the flared petals.

Why blue "gilia"? This is a reference to a previous scientific name for this plant - *Gilia longiflora*. The name changed in the 1950s and still we call this plant blue gilia, which I must admit flows more easily off the tongue than "blue ipomopsis".

Why "pale gilia"? Flower color can vary from white to lavender. This is a natural variation. For me, it reinforces why it is so important to look at flower shape (count those petals!), leaf shape, and the plant as a whole. Depending on just flower color can often mislead.

¹ Tropicos is the source of the currently accepted scientific name: <http://www.tropicos.org/>



Top: plant form, note long tubes. Center: flower closeup. Arrow indicates the 3-part stigma at the top of the style. Bottom: white and lavender flowers.



Left: flowers in bud with the petals just emerging. Arrow indicates swirled petals. Right: the long style remains attached to the ovary after the petals fall. Arrow indicates the 3-part stigma. The fruit is already starting to swell in the two upper flowers