

Great Sand Dunes

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Great Sand Dunes
National Park and Preserve



What's Growing? Identifying Common Plants

Vegetation thrives in this sandy desert. Look for these common plants near the Visitor Center, campground, or Dunes parking lot. Remember, all plants are marvels of nature and they are protected. Please leave the plants intact for those who follow in your footsteps.

Groundsel *Packera tridenticulata*

A member of the sunflower family, groundsel has bright yellow, daisy-like blossoms. Found in open areas along the entrance road and near the Visitor Center, it blooms in spring and early summer.



Evening Primrose *Oenothera caespitosa*

Watch for the brazen white blossoms of the primrose along the entrance road. Easy to identify, the primrose has four big fragile petals. Blossoms open overnight and attract night pollinators, fading in the heat of the next day.



Scurfpea *Psoraleidium lanceolatum*

Scurfpea is one of 20 plants that lives in the sand. When scurfpea is buried in sand, it has the capability to send out a runner, known as a rhizome, that grows into a new plant. This is an effective survival mechanism.



Western Wallflower *Erysimum capitatum*

Despite the drab name, this showy mustard family member blooms on 8 to 30" stems. On the tall stalks, the leaves are on the bottom and the flowers grace the tops. Find the wallflower along roadsides and the Montville Nature Trail.



Scarlet Gilia *Ipomopsis aggregata*

Bright red trumpets with star-shaped flowers attract hummingbirds. Narrow leaves and stems reduce moisture loss in this arid environment. Gilia blooms from July to September.



Yucca *Yucca glauca*

Well-adapted to a desert environment, yucca has spiny, sharp leaves (hence, the nickname, "Spanish bayonet"). Yuccas have deep tap-roots. Only one moth species on earth pollinates the yucca. Deer savor the blossoms.



Rocky Mountain Beeplant *Cleome serrulata*

Magenta flowers sit stately at the tops of these tall plants. Bean-like seed pods develop on the lower part of the stalk. Look for beeplant along roadsides, near the campground and the Dunes parking lot.



Prairie Sunflower *Helianthus petiolaris*

In moist years, the sunflower blossoms profusely in the grasslands and the dunes. It is well adapted to arid conditions, as seeds can lie dormant for years waiting for the right moisture conditions.



Pinon or Hoary Aster *Machaeranthera canescens*

Asters are late summer bloomers.

Look for this purple aster along the entrance road and near the Visitor Center. In prolific years, it paints the landscape purple.



Hairy Golden Aster *Heterotheca villosa*

"Aster" is Greek for star. These bright gold "stars" or flowers dominate the grasslands from mid-July through mid-September. Hairs on the leaves and stems keep the plant cool and trap moisture.



Rabbitbrush *Ericameria nauseosa*

Rabbitbrush is one of the most common shrubs in the grasslands/shrublands. It is a survivor even during periods of drought. A late summer bloomer, it continues blossoming into fall. Five species of rabbitbrush grow here.



Small-flowered Sand Verbena *Tripterocalyx micranthus*

The distinctive rosy pink seed pods are eye-catchers, often mistaken for flowers. Look closely to view the delicate white flowers. The seed bracts break off and are whisked at the whim of the wind to new locations.



Wax Currant *Ribes cereum*

Find the wax currant near the Visitor Center walkway. Berries are edible and are tasty to birds, small rodents, and bears. Ripened berries are red. Waxy leaves prevent moisture loss in this desert environment.



Trumpet Gooseberry *Ribes leptanthum*

The wax currant and gooseberry have similar looking leaves; to differentiate, gooseberries have thorns on stems and the currant does not. Ripe dark purple fruits of the gooseberry are edible.



Indian Ricegrass *Achnatherum hymenoides*

Ricegrass is common in the dunes and in the surrounding grasslands. Native Americans used the tiny seeds for food, grinding them into flour. Imagine collecting enough seeds to make a loaf of bread!

**Fringed Sage** *Artemisia frigida*

Look closely for this plant; it's quite abundant in the grasslands. Light-colored silvery, lacy leaves are well adapted to the extremes of sunlight as they reflect rather than absorb the sun's heat. This plant smells similar to the sage of spice variety.



Rocky Mountain Juniper *Juniperus scopulorum*

Juniper leaves are scale-like and evergreen. Relatively insect and rot resistant, the reddish wood has an aromatic scent. Although junipers are often called cedars, there are no true cedars native to North America. Pioneers built fences with the durable wood; some remnants are still in evidence today.

**Piñon** *Pinus edulis*

Piñons have the largest seeds in the pine family. Every three to seven years, bumper crops of nuts occurs. 2005 was a banner year! Rich in fats, the protein in the nuts is comparable to steak; Native Americans depended on this food source to get them through winter.



Narrowleaf Cottonwood *Populus angustifolia*

Find groves of cottonwoods in moist areas and along streamsides. The trees growing along the edges of lower Medano Creek are primarily cottonwoods. These trees send out new shoots or suckers, to further establish themselves. In fall, the gold leaves color the landscape.

**Sandbar or Coyote Willow** *Salix exigua*

Another streamside resident, this shrubby three to ten foot willow is common at the edge of the dunes and forms dense thickets. The leaves are slender compared to those of the cottonwood. It favors sandy soils.



Prickly Pear Cactus *Opuntia polyacantha*

Nicknamed starvation cactus, the fruits and stems (in tough times) were used for human food. Raw cactus stems taste like cucumber. Spines were removed via scraping or burning. On cattle ranches in lean years, whole fields of cacti were burned and fed to livestock.

**Claret Cup Cactus** *Echinocereus triglochidiatus*

In the spring, look for this cactus along the lower canyon walls of Mosca Pass. The bold red trumpet-shaped flowers attract hummingbirds. To reach the nectar deep within the blossom, hummingbirds have to immerse their entire head into the flower.



Blazing Star *Mentzelia multiflora*

Another common name for this plant is stickleaf; the sticky leaves catch on clothing or animal fur. This plant often goes unnoticed during daylight hours, until the vibrant blossoms open in late afternoon or early evening.

**Locoweed** *Oxytropis sericea*

A member of the pea family, locoweed has silver, hairy leaflets. Locoweed is toxic and produces erratic behavior in livestock if it is consumed, due to a high selenium content.



Winterfat *Krascheninnikovia lanata*

Notice the clusters of winterfat near the campground and along the entrance road. These shrubs have white wooly, cottony fruits and are most distinctive in late summer and fall. Winterfat favors alkaline soil.

**Three-Leaf Sumac** *Rhus trilobata*

In fall, the leaves of this shrub turn hues of fiery red. The flowers, which emerge before the leaves, produce edible berries. Also called lemonade bush, the ripe berries soaked in water make a tart lemonade-like drink.



Some additional plant information sources available at the Visitor Center bookstore:

Bowers, Janice Emily. *100 Roadside Wildflowers of Southwest Woodlands*, Western National Parks Association, 1987.

Dahms, David. *Rocky Mountain Wildflowers Pocket Guide*. Paragon Press, 1999.

Robertson, Leigh. *Southern Rocky Mountain Wildflowers*. The Globe Pequot Press, 1999.

Taylor, Ronald J. *Sagebrush Country: A Wild Sanctuary*. Mountain Press Publishing Company, 1992.