

Lewisia

Article by Doug Dawson
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Lewisia brachycalyx. Photo by Doug Dawson

It was one of those mornings I have come to celebrate here in Arizona, a nature hiker's delight. Monday, March 16, 2009, the weather was, as usual, tailor-made for a great hiking day in the Arizona wilderness.

Just the day before, we had finished our 2009 Show and Sale which was about a month early due to a necessary change in scheduling at the DBG. I had gathered three fellow explorers, Woody Minnich, Tom Steuber, and Steve Martinez to accompany me up state route 87 toward Payson. About one half mile south of Rye, is a trailhead sign pointing west for the Barnhardt Trail in the Mazatzal Wilderness area.



We took two vehicles. Woody and Steve drove together. Tom accompanied me in my jeep. Tom and I discussed some of our previous plant-finding expeditions. I mentioned to him that although we had visited many of Arizona's cacti and succulents in habitat together, we hadn't yet tried to find any of the three *Lewisia* succulents which grow in Arizona. We need to do that this year. The Barnhardt Trailhead was about four miles in on a gravel road

from highway 87, with a nice parking area and signs for the trail. I had told Woody of the impressive colonies of *Agave toumeana bella* and other plants that can be found along this trail, which I have explored many times since August, 1974.

Within one minute of heading out on the trail, BOOM ! There they were, a beautifully colored field of *Lewisia brachycalyx* with blooms of Easter pastel pinks and even whites. I couldn't believe it. I had passed within a few feet of them on several other hikes there, but since they were not in flower, they had eluded me completely. It was as beautiful



as a spring field of crocus blooms! We took many photos and proceeded on our three hour hike up the trail to a natural rockery and saddle point and back down to the parking lot. We were not disappointed in the many cacti, succulents, bulbs and wildflowers along the way, including the genera *Agave*, *Sedum*, *Dudleya*, *Graptopetalum*, *Escobaria*, *Echinocereus*, and many other delights.

Lewisia brachycalyx.

Back to the *Lewisia*: The genus *Lewisia* belongs to the plant family Montiaceae (formerly and better known as Portulacaceae). *Lewisia* is named after Meriwether Lewis of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Members of this genus are found from Alaska, down through the Rockies and all the way to northern Baja. They are most prevalent in northern California and the Pacific Northwest.

Our *Lewisia brachycalyx* is a perennial succulent with a small caudex and thick, starchy roots. Above ground, the leaves are green, succulent, flat, smooth, all radiating from the plant's center. Leaves are narrow and about three to four inches long. Flowers range from nearly snow white to pale shades of pink (see photos).

Since these beauties grow at 4,200 feet elevation and higher, they are not geared to be desert floor dwellers. I have seen them for sale at Lowe's and, of all places, out front of Trader Joe's once. I have not tried to grow them, but I'm sure I will. They may require their summer rest to be indoors. If anyone

has tried or plans to try to grow them here in the Phoenix area, share your results with your fellow club members. ...and remember: Take a hike!





