

Our Local Environment: Native Wildflowers – the Western Wallflower

By Ann Harris DAVIDSON, FHVA Board Member-at-Large, in The Chronicle, Summer 2020, p.18

We can all list many reasons why we chose to live in Four Hills Village; for some of us, those reasons include our ready access to “the hills”, thanks to the City of Albuquerque’s Manzano-Four Hills Open Space to our east. This will be the first in a series of vignettes to highlight the native wildflowers that we can see from the trails in our local Open Space.

The **western wallflower** (*Erysimum capitatum*) has been showing off its bright yellow flowers through late April and May. Why care? Well, there are several interesting things about this native wildflower.

1. Its common name (“wallflower”) seems inappropriate for a bold, showy flower that stands out in the desert (and does not necessarily grow near walls), but the origin of its name goes back centuries, to Europe, where a wallflower cousin (*Erysimum cheiri*), which does grow on or near stone or masonry walls, is found; thus, the name was transported to America.
2. The western wallflower is widespread, found from our desert edge of the piñon-juniper zone to the higher montane ecozone on the trails up to the Sandia peaks, BUT, as the altitude increases, its flowers change color, from yellow to burnt orange to red at around 10,000ft beside the upper reaches of the La Luz Trail!
3. The western wallflower is a native member of the mustard (Brassicaceae) family, which is better known for crop plants, such as cabbage and broccoli. (Many of the other mustard family plants seen locally in the spring, such as tansy mustard or flixweed – which also have yellow flowers and similar long, narrow seed pods – are non-native invasive weeds.)



4. Local Native Americans are reported to have had several medicinal uses for the western wallflower. According to a 1980 report (“*A Study of the Medical Ethnobotany of the Zuni Indians of New Mexico*”) by Camazine and Bye in the Journal of Ethnopharmacology, the Zuni used an infusion of the whole plant as an external rub for muscle aches, with the flower and seed pods eaten as an emetic. Littlefield and Burns (in “*Wildflowers of the Sandia & Manzano Mountains*”) report other medicinal uses of it by the Navajo and Puebloan tribes.

These western wallflowers are annuals in our dry conditions and are now (in June) coming to the end of their flowering but, on your next walk in our Open Space, see whether you can spot some of them.