

The golden raintree (*Koelreuteria paniculata*) is my favourite xeric tree, and has been for several years now. My favourite drought tolerant shrub has to be Apache Plume (*Fallugia paradoxa*).

This little known shrub is native to the Southwestern US and further south into Mexico. Its characteristics and cultural requirements make it perfectly suited for the Okanagan's hot and dry summers.

With a typical mature size of four feet height and spread, apache plume is a relatively small shrub. It is considered a semi-evergreen, meaning it keeps at least some of its very small, light green leaves over the winter when it is dormant.

Being a member of the rose (*Rosaceae*) family, the flowers have five petals, closely resembling a strawberry or white potentilla flower. Blooms begin to show in mid to late spring and continue throughout the summer and into early fall. Spent flowers form wispy pink seed heads that, because of the extended bloom time, display alongside the younger white blooms.

Although it remains compact, the apache plume can look somewhat 'wild' if left without spring pruning or at least removal of the previous year's seed heads. Similar to the native rabbitbrush, an annual haircut creates a more ornamental look, without losing any of appeal of the shrub.

Once the plant is established, apache plume does not require much, if any, supplemental watering. It is used to living in very dry and harsh areas. Keeping this in mind, be sure to plant apache plume in a location that gets full sun and has very good drainage. This shrub does well in alkaline soil and will be perfectly happy and healthy in the poorest (least fertile) soil you have in your yard!

Apache plume has light grey bark and is well-branched; perhaps this is why deer tend not to stop and browse.

One of the principles of xeriscape is to practice 'zonal planting' -- group plants according to their light and water requirements. Other plants having the same cultural requirements as apache plume include our native rabbitbrush and big sage, yucca, yarrow cultivars, Ozark sundrops, little and big bluestem, prairie dropseed (three ornamental grasses), and Russian sage. Golden raintree, a larger specimen, also shares its growing needs.

As you can see in the photograph, the apache plume produces copious amounts of seeds. However, although it was planted in our demonstration garden in September 2005, we have yet to see a volunteer.

Fortunately, we've been able to grow this shrub from seed quite successfully. We nurture it for a couple of years before it's ready to put into retail on its way to local landscapes. A bit of a process, but gardeners know all about patience, don't we? Apache plume is an outstanding and unique shrub and is worth the wait!

Did you know the golden raintree planted near the driveway at Grasslands Nursery was donated to us by the late Dr. Jeurgen Hansen? We used to call it our 'phoebe stick' because it was completely stripped of all branches when we planted it and within minutes a western red phoebe was perched upon it!

Toni Boot is the founder and owner of Grasslands Nursery in Summerland, a nursery specializing in sustainable gardening. Comments and suggestions for future Water Wisdom columns may be directed to her at grassnursery@telus.net. Visit www.grasslandsnursery.ca to join our blog discussion.