



## Flowers are plants' shot at immortality

By Jimmy Biggerstaff  
Hi-Desert Star

YUCCA VALLEY — "He's a little nerdy about flowers," Stefanie Ritter, Hi-Desert Nature Museum biologist said as she introduced the speaker at a recent lecture.

The unorthodox intro drew titters of laughter from the audience. Most of the crowd knew Mark Wheeler and his knowledge and affinity for botany. They also knew Ritter and Wheeler are married and the biologist's German-accented ebullience provides the perfect foil to Wheeler's low-key, fact-filled delivery style.

The plant expert provided a primer on spring wildflowers and how to read the desert bloom from the big picture overview with its miles and miles of color to the beauty of

the smallest bloom, best appreciated through a magnifying glass.

"The beauty is there," Wheeler said as he projected an image of a colorful carpet of annual blooms, accompanied by oohs and aahs of the people present. The intensely vivid photo was from the bloom of 1998, reverently referred to as a 100-year bloom.

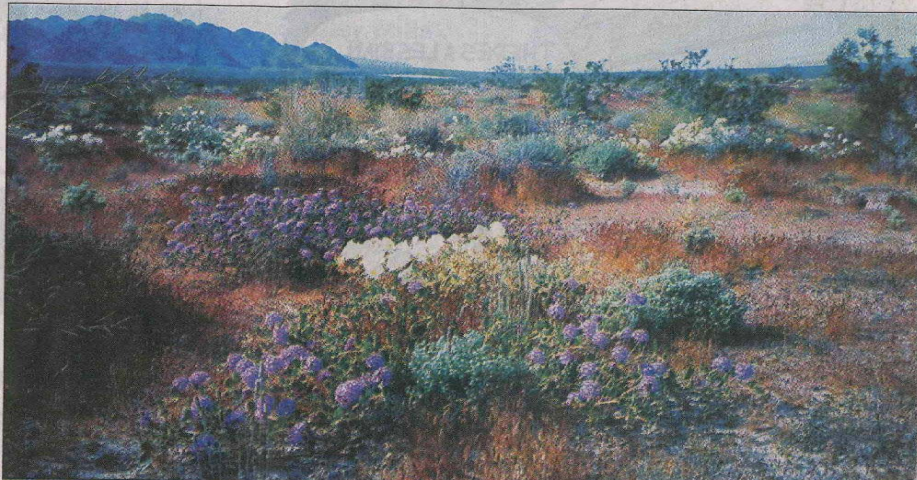
As a contrast to the image showing the sea of colors, Wheeler projected a shot of a gilia plant with 35 blooms. For scale, the botanist had placed his pocket knife in the photo. The plant easily fit within the length of the closed-blade knife.

Famously low tech, Wheeler briefly attempted to operate a laser pointer to highlight the points on a chia bloom before declaring, "I don't like all this high-tech stuff," and used his finger to make his point on the screen.

Among the many mind-bogglers of desert bloomology are how many seeds are produced. A very patient scientist counted 63,800 seeds in a square meter of sand in the Colorado Desert.

"These guys produce a lot of seeds," Wheeler said with obvious understatement as he worked through his slide show.

Annuals make the big blooms, filling the space between shrubs each spring,



Purple verbena and white evening primrose bloom east of Twentynine Palms in a 2008 photograph taken by wildflower aficionado Mark Wheeler. This year's bloom probably won't be as spectacular.

### Next topic: photography

The last lecture of Hi-Desert Nature Museum's Winter Lecture Series begins at noon March 22. Photographer Kevin Wong of Joshua Tree will present "From the Equator to the Desert — Photography Through the Eyes of a Traveler."

Wheeler explained. Annual blooms are more affected by heat, wind, floods and other environmental extremes than the perennial blooms of shrubs and trees.

"In some ways, it's great to be a perennial," Wheeler said, explaining the larger plants have the size and structure to survive surface flooding that wipes out annual blooms. "If an herbivore comes up and takes a

bite out of you, you've got plenty to spare."

Annuals generally put their energy into colors to attract pollinators, Wheeler explained, pointing out a particularly brilliant flower and adding the display takes energy to produce.

"This is my shot," the botanist said, personifying the thoughts of a plant. "If I don't make it, that's it for me."

What makes for a robust

spring bloom?

"For all of this to work, you have to have rainfall," Wheeler explained. Furthermore, "It has to come in the right quantity at the right time." That amount and time is an inch or more in one event falling in September to November, sufficient moisture to saturate the soil and remove seeds' coating.

Additionally, Wheeler described a "March miracle" phe-

nomenon where a heavy rain followed by a few days of upper 70s to 80 degree temperatures are conducive to a bountiful bloom.

"The blooms aren't random," Wheeler said. "Everything is a response to environmental factors."

As spring looms, Wheeler anticipated the basic question everyone has: "This year isn't going to be much."

