

# Did you know there are boy and girl plants?

by Jim Blackburn



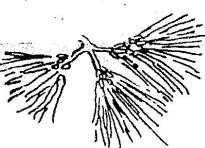



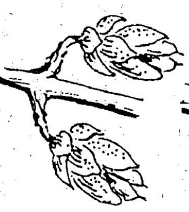
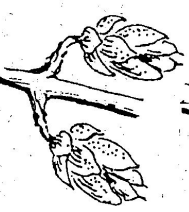
It's not widely known, but there are boys and girls in the plant kingdom, just as there are in the animal kingdom.

Many of those plants are right here in the desert. Have you noticed that, while some plants appear the same, they have different flowers? You've got to look closely.

This is known to botanists as dioecism. Is it rare? Not really. Among the flowering plants, 37 out of 51 orders have separate male and female plants.

There are many right here in the desert, for example desert broom, jojoba and Mormon tea.

Then I ask, is it possible to tell a boy plant from a girl

Boys (Staminate Inflorescence)			
			
			
Girls (Pistillate Inflorescence)			
			
			
Common Name		Desert Broom	
Genus - specific epithet		<i>Baccharis sarothroides</i>	
Family		Sunflower - Compositae	
Common Name		Jojoba	
Genus - specific epithet		<i>Simmondsia chinensis</i>	
Family		Box - Buxaceae	
Common Name		Mormon Tea	
Genus - specific epithet		<i>Ephedra nevadensis</i>	
Family		Jointfir - Ephedraceae	

plant when they aren't in bloom? Not easily. Often there are remnants of the flowering still attached to the plant, different ones on male and female plants. Also the girl plant's function is to produce the fruit and seed which may remain on the



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plant for some time.

Are boys in the plant kingdom more robust? Are girls more attractive? There are some differences, but they're not as noticeable as among us animals. Maybe that's not surprising because the plants can't move around looking for a mate.

So how is the wedding consummated? Who's the

matchmaker? Generally pollination is by insects, often small bees, and sometimes the pollen is blown by the wind.

How can one distinguish a boy flower from a girl flower? That's not easy to do. See the sketches for the shapes of three familiar desert plants.

And what do the flowers look like? Among these in-

sect-pollinated, dioecious species they are relatively small. They're white, pale yellow or pale green in color. Not too noticeable.

Why should the plant kingdom do this boy-girl thing? For the same reason that we animals have evolved this way. Sexual reproduction gives the species a better chance of survival.

How does a plant know if a seed is going to be a male or female? Darned if I know. We animals have this problem, too!

Then how about the ratio of boy plants to girl plants? It's about the same as animals, usually half and half.

On your next outing, in your yard or on the hillside, you might have fun pointing out to your visitors some of subtle differences in the blossoms of the boys and girls in the plant kingdom.

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This column is written by members of the Desert Awareness Committee of Cave Creek. For more information on this topic, please write the Desert Awareness Committee, P.O. Box 1722, Cave Creek, AZ 85331.