



Friends of SNOW CANYON

What's That Plant???

Mormon Tea is part of a family of plants known by their botanical name, *Ephedra*. There are over seventy species of *Ephedra* growing across several continents including Europe, Asia and in pockets of both North and South America. Two species can be found growing in Snow Canyon:

Ephedra viridis — Mormon Tea or Brigham Tea and *Ephedra nevadensis* — Nevada Ephedra or Jointfir. The stems of *E. viridis* are generally more erect and dark green on healthy plants while those of *E. nevadensis* are wider spreading at divergent angles and more of a gray-green color. Both are referred to as Mormon Tea. The local names came from the use of the tea by Mormon settlers which was approved by Brigham Young as a substitute for coffee.

Mormon Tea — *Ephedra* sp. Ephedraceae — Ephedra Family



Mormon Tea is made by steeping dried twigs in hot water. It was considered one of the best herbal medicines made by Native Americans. The seeds were also roasted and eaten whole or ground into meal.

The drug Ephedrine is one of the oldest known drugs, having been used by the Chinese for at least 5,000 years! It is derived primarily from several Chinese species. These two native Ephedras are not commercially cultivated for the medicinal trade.

Ephedra is unique and easy to identify. The stems are actually the distinguishing feature as the leaves have been reduced to tiny scales or bracts that are found in pairs at the stem joints. The evergreen stems are round and slender, varying in color from yellow-green to blue-green and are photosynthetic.



Ephedra are densely branched, woody shrubs growing 3–5 feet tall, resembling a broom. They have been known to survive over 100 years due to a thick and woody root system that can extend over six feet deep.

No flowers are produced as *Ephedra* are conifers or cone bearing plants. Tiny male and female cones are borne on separate plants in the spring. You may not see any cones appear in dry years as ample rainfall is needed. Black seeds ripen in May to August and are often dispersed by rodents such as kangaroo rats.



Male cones



Female cones