

Rains bring promise of spectacular desert flowers



Desert dandelions, above, sand-verbena and desert sunflowers are some of the most common flowers that could appear in Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. (San Diego Union-Tribune)

By **J. Harry Jones**

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The strongest winter rainfall totals in roughly a decade have botanists and state park officials anticipating the spring wildflower season in Borrego Springs.

If all goes well, the region could yield a spectacular bloom not seen since 1997 and 1998, banner years still talked about in the tiny desert community.

“People say it was like magic in the 1990s,” said Linda Haddock, the executive director of the Borrego Springs Chamber of Commerce — who hasn’t seen a really good wildflower bloom since she moved to the desert almost a decade ago. “They said the valley was all purple. It was the reason people moved here back then.”

Jim Dice, a botanist and the manager of the Steele-Burnand Anza-Borrego Research Center at UC Irvine, said he thinks the bloom is going to be good everywhere this year.

“We’re seeing lots of germination right now,” he said.

Sand-verbena — the delicate purple flower referenced by Haddock — as well as desert sunflowers, desert dandelions and spectacle pod (white or lavender blooms) are some of the most common flowers that could appear.

But Dice and Dennis Stephen, the Anza-Borrego Desert State Park's official interpreter, said the weather over the next month still could affect the spring bloom. If it gets hot and no more rain falls, a lot of what has germinated might not emerge.

"We have had some good rainfall, and the western edges of the park are looking good. But we're always cautious with our predictions because things could change," Stephen said. "If it gets too hot, that could parch the seedlings. But we do have good germination right now."

The rain also can affect when the wildflower season starts and how long it might last.

"If this is all we get, then I think [the bloom] will start in mid- to late February," Dice said. "But if it continues to rain, it might hold off a little bit and go longer."

Perhaps the best way for people to find out what is happening on the desert floor is to call the park's Wildflower Hotline, which is frequently updated.

Haddock said once the word gets out that a great bloom is upon the desert, people will flock to the area. Up to an estimated 1.5 million people visit the park annually.

"People need to be prepared," Haddock said. "When they hear the news, the cheer ... get out here."

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