Gray Rabbitbrush (*Chrysothamnus nauseosus*)

When driving through the High Desert in the fall you can't help but notice the bright yellow flowering rabbitbrush. One of the last blooming native wildflowers before winter closes in, it puts on a grand finale to summer colors. It may appear to dominate a plant community, particularly in disturbed areas, because of its visibility, but is not overly competitive and will be largely replaced by other vegetation over time as the plant community matures.

There are actually two subspecies of rabbitbrush that appear in the Bend area and throughout the site: gray and green (leaves and stem colors reflect the common names). The gray rabbitbrush is the more prevalent and noticeable of the two, being larger and having more showy flowers. In spite of its name, rabbitbrush is not a popular food for rabbits, or for other animals for that matter. It contains chemicals that are toxic to grazing animals, but which seem to decrease in strength during winter. As other food becomes scarce, the leaves, flowers, and seeds become a winter food source for deer, antelope, elk, small mammals, and birds. The shrub also provides year-round cover for small mammals and birds.

In part because of its late blooming period rabbitbrush is an important source of nectar for a wide variety of native insects, including butterflies and small bees.

Gray rabbitbrush is also known as rubber rabbitbrush because its sap is high in rubber content. It was looked at as an alternate source of rubber during World War II, but was discarded because of the high cost of production. There is recent interest, however, in using it as a source for hypoallergenic rubber products used by people with latex allergies. Other potential commercial uses being investigated include biomaterial and bioenergy fuels, anti-malarial drugs, and insect repellents.

Rabbitbrush branches were used by Native Americans for basket weaving, and other parts of the plant for chewing gum, tea, cough syrup, and various medications. The blossoms can be boiled to make a bright yellow dye.