

Native Plants Instead of Common Exotics

Several of the Native Plant Society of Texas chapters in the area, Boerne, Fredericksburg, and Kerrville, have a program to promote native plants called NICE, Natives Instead of Common Exotics. They highlight and publicize a new native plant each month or quarter and work with local nurseries to make sure people can find that plant for sale.

I have had many discussions with people either about the plants they have on their property or plants under consideration for planting, and often when I mention that this or that plant is or is not a native, I get kind of a blank stare as if to say, "What difference does it make?" It is a good question, and to anyone wishing to conserve, restore or improve our native Hill Country habitat, it makes a significant difference. Here is why.

To state the obvious, native Hill Country plants grew up here. They have been part of the natural ecosystem for hundreds or thousands of years. They have been successfully living, growing and propagating through droughts, floods, severe thunderstorms, insect and other animal predation, fires and whatever else Mother Nature dishes out. They have been coexisting with all of the other native flora and fauna of the Hill Country and have obviously survived. And, and this is important, they have done so up until the past 150 years or so without any help or interference from man.

What does this mean? It means that the native plants have evolved to live here with our variable weather patterns, our caliche soil and our early and late freeze dates without any human giving them extra water, or fertilizer, or pesticide, or pruning, or pollinating. In other words, they can take care of themselves, thank you very much.

Another characteristic of native plants is that they seldom become invasive (spread uncontrolled into areas outside of where they were planted) as many exotic plants do. Some exotics that do become invasive and cause serious problems for the native habitat include Chinaberry, Chinese pistache, Chinese tallow (are we beginning to see a pattern here?) Ligustrum, Nandina, Giant reed, Bamboo, Vitex, Johnsongrass, KR bluestem, Giant salvinia, and Tamarisk (salt cedar).

The astute reader might wish to point out that cedar and willow baccharis (povertyweed), although native plants, have become invasive also. This is true, but both of them have become invasive only because of disturbances caused by man, the removal of fire in the case of cedar and soil disturbance in the case of baccharis.

Most all of the exotics listed above were brought into this country for what seemed like a good reason at the time, and no one expected this would lead to the invasion we now experience. The law of unintended consequences comes into play here. We didn't intend for these plants to take over and destroy or alter the native habitat. But given the

huge number of imported plant species, the chances were very high that some of them would find the Hill Country very much to their liking with nothing to inhibit their propagation.

When non-native species crowd their way into native habitats, they disrupt the many interrelationships among all the native species of plants and animals, sometimes causing the extinction of native species.

Many of the exotic plants brought to the Hill Country, even those that do not ever become invasive, still require more water than similar native plants. This is especially true of lawn grasses and many ornamentals. So for areas such as ours where water is a precious commodity, having native plants that do not need extra water is a very important feature. It should be noted here that newly planted native plants, like all others, need extra water to become established.

Finally, another reason to plant native plants is that because of the increased deer populations in the area in the last few decades, many native plants are becoming scarce because of deer predation, especially on the new young trees. Where will the replacements for the mature hardwoods come from? Planting native plants and caging them from the deer helps restore the native plant balance that we used to have.

So, it would be NICE if everyone would take these points into consideration and work to conserve what native plants you have and plant only natives for a more natural landscape. Until next time...

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