

Ahhhh....Fall

Ever since I escaped the winters of the northlands to come back to Texas, fall has been my most favorite time of the year. (In the north, fall just makes you look forward with dread to the winter; spring, so long awaited, is the time for joy and optimism.)

Fall also has to be one of Mother Nature's busiest times. All sorts of things are happening. Maximilian sunflowers, goldenrod, gayfeather, fall asters, mountain sage, cowpen daisies and common sunflowers are all taking advantage of the cool sunny weather to bloom and produce seeds before the winter.

Many plants are maturing their seeds or acorns or nuts. Walnuts and pecans are maturing, with the pecans splitting their husks to release the nuts and the walnuts dropping their husks so they can rot and release their nuts.

All of the various oaks are dropping their acorns. By the way, did you know that white oaks produce mature acorns in the fall after flowering in the spring, but red oaks (Texas red oak/Spanish oak and blackjack oak) require another year for the acorns to mature?

Many of our native grasses are taking advantage of the rains a few weeks ago to flower and make seeds. I know, most people don't think much about grasses making flowers, and some of them are pretty small and don't last very long, but when you see eastern gamagrass or yellow Indiangrass in flower, they are really beautiful. And beginning in November, when the little bluestem begins to turn an orange-red and open its fluffy seed head and you catch it with the light shining through the stems, it is a wonderful sight.

Soon, as the leaves begin to turn, all the hillsides will be transformed into paintings. Spanish oaks and flame-leaf sumacs turning red, cedar elms and escarpment black cherries turning yellow, cypress trees turning copper, all contrasted by the continued green of the live oaks and the cedars, give the Hill Country a whole new look. I know, it doesn't exactly compare to parts of the Midwest and Northeast, but these are OUR fall colors and we don't have to go anywhere to enjoy them.

Not all of the activity of fall is taking place with the plants. The animal kingdom is pretty busy also. With many species of migrant birds stopping by on their way south, we get to see species we don't usually see around here, even if it is just for a few days. Around our place, most of the hummingbirds seem to have already departed, but we still have a few late migrants that are enjoying our flowers and feeder. The lesser goldfinches are taking advantage of some sunflowers that bloomed earlier and are now just, apparently, delicious brown seeds. If people were not so eager to cut down dead flower stalks, the birds would really love to have the seed heads to play with into the winter.

The white-tailed bucks have lost their velvet by now and are showing renewed interest in the does. They need to fatten up for the rut and also to survive the winter. Fortunately, they have the acorn crop to give them the extra energy for the coming months, but they will certainly have to share the acorns with the turkeys, squirrels, and other critters. Unfortunately, mast (acorns, nuts, fruits) only lasts so long, and usually runs out as winter intensifies, leaving the animals with the least supply of food when they really need it.

As soon as the leaves begin to fall, the squirrels will begin to think about making nests for the winter. Every hollow log, tree or limb, or underground burrow, will be investigated by every little creature in the area before they all find suitable homes.

The raccoons are having to compete with the deer, the skunks, the squirrels and who knows what other critters for the Texas persimmons, Mexican plums, and other fruits. But as they enjoy their fall fruits and wander around, the seeds of the next generation will be planted.

Humans can get in on the act also, as this is the best time of the year to plant trees or shrubs or perennials as well as wildflower seeds. So enjoy this nice weather and get out and join Mother Nature and all the goings on.

Until next time....

Jim Stanley is a member of Riverside Nature Center and the Native Plant Society of Texas, a Texas Master Naturalist and author of "Hill Country Landowner's Guide". He can be reached at jstmn@ktc.com