

## Life and Changes on a One Acre Piece of the Hill Country: Part II

Last week I discussed the conditions and changes I have observed on a one acre piece of property we have owned for 16 years. That acre, part of a larger property of an overgrazed, overbrowsed working ranch is a rocky savanna with a few trees showing a distinct browseline and little grass or forbs. I described how, after placing some small wire cages around some of the trees, woody plant sprouts have appeared inside the cages where the animals can't get to them.

As I discussed last week, we built our house about 200 yards from the acre described above, on a site with slightly better soil and more trees. We immediately built a high fence around one acre surrounding the house about 11 years ago. Other than slightly deeper soil, more trees, and some post oaks not present on the above acre, the two sites were similar and had been part of the same ranch management for over thirty years.

The acre around the house, inside the fence, had 40 hardwood trees (live oaks, blackjack oaks and mostly post oaks) and 10 cedar trees when we fenced it. Since that time we have lost one blackjack oak to hypoxylon and the top of another.

I recently walked around the yard counting the small shoots and saplings of hardwood trees and vines that have come up on their own in the past 11 years. It was not an exhaustive search and I undoubtedly missed some, and there have been others that we have either removed, dug up to grow in pots or died, so the numbers are certainly low. I found 108 hardwood tree and shrub sprouts and saplings that we had nothing to do with their being there. In other words, these were all "volunteers" and represent what Mother Nature put there by herself.

Many of these sprouts (37) are live oaks, post oaks and blackjack oaks that may well be root sprouts of mature trees. But the rest are of species that are growing no closer than a few hundred yards away and some we have no idea where the closest source of seeds is, such as hackberries, gum bumelia, mesquite, and rusty blackhaw viburnum. All of these young trees range from about a foot tall to 6 to 8 feet tall. We have blackjack oaks, escarpment black cherries, hackberries and prairie flameleaf sumacs in the 6 to 8 foot range, and one of the latter which is over 15 feet tall.

We also have over 50 native vine plants which have established themselves around the yard, including greenbrier, grape, and Virginia creeper.

We have planted a number of native shrubs which have grown to produce berries which have been the source of new plants scattered around the acre, presumably by birds and small animals, such as possumhaw, and some of which also produce root sprouts, including roughleaf dogwood, Blanco crabapple, and trumpet creeper.

In addition, numerous native grasses and wildflowers planted in specific places over the years have produced seeds that obviously traveled to other places in the yard and reseeded themselves.

It is worth noting that none of these new plants can be seen outside the high fence.

The point of all of this is just to illustrate how Mother Nature propagates her plants and establishes replacement plants for her trees, shrubs, vines, forbs and grasses, and to note that it means that this process is still operating even in areas that have been seriously overgrazed and overbrowsed for some time. All that is required is to protect the young plants from overabundant herbivores, native and non-native, out there.

Of course, not all of the woody sprouts will make it to maturity, and in areas not fenced, but having lower (more “normal”) animal numbers, some would certainly be eaten, but some would escape and that is how the diversity of Hill Country vegetation is perpetuated.

We will not be able to allow all of the 108 woody sprouts to become mature trees or vines because the place would become an over-shaded jungle. But to the extent we can allow many of these new plants to survive, we help to maintain the seed bank for native species and to maintain a more healthy habitat for native birds and animals.

Plus it is just fun to watch Mother Nature do her thing.

Until next time...

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