

The Ubiquitous Live Oak: Symbol of the Hill Country

Ask most people what words come to mind when you say Hill Country, “hills” may be the first word they think of, but “live oaks” will likely be a close second. No other tree symbolizes the Hill Country as well. I feel confident in saying that the number of live oaks in the Hill Country is second only to cedar (Ashe juniper).

The live oak in this area (*Quercus fusiformis*) is sometimes called the Texas live oak, or the Plateau live oak or Escarpment live oak. These names distinguish it from the Southern live oak or Virginia live oak (*Quercus virginiana*) which grows more along the Texas coast and east all the way to the Atlantic. Some experts believe the Plateau live oak is not a separate species, but a sub-species of the Virginia live oak, and others believe there are hybrids of the two. For our purposes here, I will just call our trees live oaks.

Live oaks are classified as semi-evergreen because they do lose their leaves every year like other deciduous trees, but they do so at almost the same time as new leaves are beginning to form, usually in March or April. So the tree is actually never without green leaves or is only without green leaves for a few days—which is why it is called a “live” oak.

The tree flowers at the same time as the new leaves are forming. The male flower parts are the catkins which are a string of loosely attached structures that hang down from the twig. The female flower parts are tiny inconspicuous structures attached to the twig. As are most trees without showy flowers, they are wind-pollinated. Acorns mature in the fall.

Live oaks are fairly prolific root sprouters. That means that new plants come up around the “mother” tree and grow from the roots of the mother tree. These sprouts have the advantage that they derive their water and minerals from the root system of the mature tree and thus have an advantage over a plant sprouting from an acorn. The new sprout may have points on the margins of the leaves somewhat like a holly leaf, which confuses some people into thinking it is not a live oak (it is not uncommon for the leaves of newly-sprouted plants to have points or be stiffer than mature leaves—probably a protection mechanism to keep them from being eaten).

It is common to find a group of mature live oaks of the same size growing close to each other. While these may appear to be separate trees, they are more likely to be all connected through a root system that was originally the “mother” tree (which may be long gone). That means all of these trees are really clones of the original and are all part of a single plant.

The fact that live oaks in close proximity to each other are probably interconnected through the roots also explains why oak wilt kills many more live oaks than any other species. The oak wilt fungus, once infecting one tree through a wound, can travel through the vascular system and the roots to other connected trees.

Live oaks are pretty slow growing, even when compared with other oaks. Slow growing trees usually are the strongest. I know of three or four live oak root sprouts on our place, all protected from browsers since they were discovered, that are between 6 and 10 years old, and none of them are over 3 feet tall!

During last year's drought, I have personally witnessed several hardwoods and cedar (Ashe juniper) trees that died and have heard of similar experiences from many other folks as well, but it seems that, given the number of live oaks around, we have lost a smaller percentage of them than most other species.

On the deer-food favorability lists, live oak is only moderately preferred. That, plus the fact that they are such prolific root sprouters (shin oaks also produce lots of root sprouts) means that on properties with only moderate populations of browsers (goats, exotics and white-tailed deer) it is possible to find small live oak saplings with leaves below the browseline. And on these same properties one frequently finds small, relatively young live oaks that will be around to become mature. So even with the high Hill Country deer population, we are less likely to see the decline in live oaks that we are likely to see in many other hardwoods.

Until next time...

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