

Fall in the Hill Country—Like a Second Spring

As someone who was temporarily transplanted from Texas to the Northeast (in order to make a living), I can tell you that folks in the snowbelt have definite ideas about the seasons. Spring is the season of hope that things will get better, Summer is the season when it is fun to do things outside, Fall is pretty but a harbinger of worse times to come, and Winter is something just to be endured if you can.

Here in the Hill Country, however, especially in years of good rainfall, fall is every bit as enjoyable as spring—the weather is just as nice and the vegetation is blooming profusely.

This year, most of us were fortunate enough to have good spring rains, adequate summer rains and welcome September showers—a huge contrast to last year when we endured the worst single year drought in a hundred years.

This spring and early summer we were fortunate in having spectacular drifts of native wildflowers just about everywhere, some of which were of species and numbers not seen in years. Again, a huge contrast with the previous year.

Right now it seems like everything is responding to the September rains. I have even seen the rare sight of an oak tree putting out new leaves the first week of October!

I took a pad of paper and walked around our yard recording the things that were blooming right now. The following are my lists.

Shrubs and small trees: Autumn sage of various colors, kidneywood, cenizo, retama, rose pavonia, evergreen senna, mountain sage, black dalea, and rosemary.

Perennial forbs: Lindheimer's senna, Maximilian sunflower, gayfeather, tall goldenrod, zexmenia, prairie verbena, indigo spires, yellowbells, corona de Cristo, obedient plant, gaura, Mexican bush sage, fall aster, Gregg's mistflower, rainlily, Navaho tea, straggler daisy, Mexican red sage, Mexican mint marigold, tropical sage, purple coneflower, giant blue sage, Turk's cap, and snapdragon vine.

Annual forbs: common sunflower, eryngo, hierba del Marrano and cowpen daisy.

Grasses having just put up a fresh seed head or still in bloom: Indiangrass, switchgrass, big bluestem, little bluestem, sideoats grama, silver bluestem, blue grama, buffalograss, meadow dropseed, plains lovegrass, Lindheimer muhly, canyon muhly and seep muhly.

Just outside the yard we see frostweed and snow-on-the-mountain.

The point of all of this is that we are fortunate in the Hill Country to have so many native plants that bloom in the fall. Needless to say, the butterflies and hummingbirds are happy about all of the flowers and especially the diversity of species.

This collection of plants wasn't always here and it obviously didn't just happen overnight. I can take no credit for all of the planning, planting and tending my wife did to achieve this diversity, but I can certainly attest to the beauty and enjoyment we get from it. And the butterflies, bees and other insects that evolved with these mostly native plants certainly appreciate having their foods available. And of course, the frogs, toads and lizards that live on these insects appreciate it too.

So much of what might have been called "natural areas" in the past have been lost to development, farms and overgrazed and overbrowsed ranches that much of the vegetation that was the base of the food chain for all native Hill Country animals is now disappearing.

Gardeners like my wife are working to restore native habitat to our gardens to create an oasis where both native plants and native animals can find conditions more like they had both evolved with. As the human population continues to increase and development takes increasingly more of our natural areas, the backyard oases will become more and more important.

Exotic introduced plants, either lawns or shrubs or trees or perennials, cannot substitute for native plants and at best dilute the native plant base and at worst, become invasive and crowd out native vegetation.

So I urge all landowners to grow a great diversity of native plants, eliminate the non-native ones, and do your part to preserve and restore native Hill Country areas.

And get out and enjoy this wonderful Hill Country Second Spring!

Until next time...

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