

Guide to Tree and Shrub Identification: Part VI

I previously covered trees and shrubs in the category of having simple, alternate, toothed leaves. This week I will discuss species that have simple, alternate leaves with a lobed margin. Lobes are bumps, points or other protuberances along the margin of the leaf. This category covers all of the common Hill Country oaks except for live oaks which have leaves with an entire margin.

Shin oaks, also known as white shin oaks, are generally the smallest oak trees in the Hill Country and they also have among the smallest leaves, 1-4 inches long simple leaves that have only small irregular bumps (lobes). They are also characterized as having peeling bark, being usually less than 20 feet tall with trunks less than one foot in diameter. Shin oaks are very frequently found growing in groups and they root-sprout prolifically.

Lacey oaks, also called blue oaks, have leaves that are also slightly lobed and similar to shin oaks but have a waxy coating on the leaves that gives them a blue-green or grayish cast. Lacey oaks are medium-sized trees with a bark showing a pattern of small rectangles. Lacey oaks are named after their discoverer, rancher/naturalist Howard Lacey, who owned a ranch near Turtle Creek in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Spanish oaks, or Texas red oaks, have 3 to 5 inch deeply incised, prominently lobed leaves with sharp points. As is characteristic of both red oaks in the Hill Country (Spanish oaks and blackjack oaks), the tips of the lobes have short hair-like bristles and the surface is smooth. Spanish oaks are among the first oaks to green up in the spring and they frequently turn red in the fall.

Post oaks have 3 to 5 inch leaves that frequently show two prominent rounded lobes that give the leaves a cross-like shape. The leaves are dull and slightly rough to the touch. They tend to have very straight trunks with large branches and a lighter colored bark than most trees.

Monterrey oaks or Mexican white oaks are not really native to the Hill Country, but are known to grow natively in Val Verde County. The leaves are 3 to 6 inches long with small lobes or large teeth on the tip end of the leaf. The leaves have a thick, leathery feel. Mexican white oaks are semi-evergreen in the same way live oaks are, keeping leaves through the winter and then doing leaf-exchange in the spring. This oak is commonly sold in nurseries.

Chinkapin oaks or chinquapin oaks have 3 to 6 inch long elliptic leaves with a wavy pattern of lobes around the margin. The veins show a pinnate (feather-like) pattern ending at each lobe. These are large trees that are most often found growing in deep soil in lowlands or in riparian areas.

The blackjack oak has 3 to 7 inch long and wide leaves frequently shaped like a duck foot. Being a red oak it has bristles at the end of each lobe, sometimes referred to as the “duck’s toenails”. The leaves are shiny and smooth. The bark of blackjacks tends to be darker than most other trees.

The bur oak is most often found north and east of the Hill Country, but is commonly planted in this area. It has the largest leaves (6 to 12 inches long, up to 6 inches wide) as well as the largest acorns (golf ball size). Its leaves are usually deeply incised with multiple rounded lobes.

Sycamore trees have leaves as wide as they are long and can be from 3 to 8 inches in both dimensions. The leaves usually have three main lobes with smaller lobes between the main ones. This pattern is called palmately-lobed. The bark of sycamores tends to be light-colored and peeling. They are usually found near water and can be very important trees for holding the soil of creek banks and beds in place.

Two other species that have simple, alternate, lobed leaves are mulberries, which are well-known for having multiple-shaped leaves on the same tree, and Vasey oaks, a small West Texas/Trans Pecos species.

Until next time...

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the book “Hill Country Landowner’s Guide”. He can be reached at jstmn@kctc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.