

Guide to Tree and Shrub Identification: Part VIII

Last week we finished the descriptions of woody plants that have simple leaves. Today we will begin describing woody plants that have compound leaves, and in fact all of the plants to be discussed today are classified as being “pinnately” compound, meaning they have leaflets arranged opposite each other along the central axis called a “rachis”. Both the leaflets and the rachis are lost in the fall and regrow in the spring. The accompanying photo shows nine compound leaves, all with several leaflets. All of the species discussed today have leaves arranged in an alternate manner along the main stems.

Kidneywood has the smallest leaves of this category with leaves only one to two inches long and with tiny leaflets. It is usually a medium-sized, multi-trunk shrub with an airy appearance. Kidneywood produces white flowers in clusters on spikes at the end of branches after rains. Kidneywood does not have thorns.

Eve’s necklace is a small tree with 4 to 9 inch compound leaves with oblong leaflets an inch or less long. It produces pink flowers and bean pods (it is a legume) that are constricted between the beans giving the appearance of a necklace.

Note: for the photo, the smallest leaves of most species were chosen to better fit into the photograph, most leaves you see will be larger.

Evergreen sumac can make a large shrub or small tree with three to five inch leaves. The leaflets are oblong, about one inch long, and are shiny on top. It is, as the name implies, evergreen.

Prairie flame-leaf sumac has 6 to 12 inch leaves with two to three inch long, narrow “lanceolate” (long, narrow with a sharp point) leaflets with a sharp point. The leaflets are sometimes unsymmetrical at the base, giving the leaflet a curved or sickle-shape. Prairie flame-leaf sumac can be distinguished from most other compound-leaf species by a flattened or “winged” rachis near the end of the leaf. This large shrub produces cream-colored clusters of flowers and red berries on spikes at the end of branches.

The Texas mountain laurel is a large multi-trunk shrub with shiny four to six inch leaves containing oblong shiny, one to two inch leaflets. It is best known for its very showy purple flower clusters in the spring that smell like grape Kool-Aid. This legume produces red-orange seeds in a pod. Both the seeds and leaves are poisonous. Texas mountain laurel is evergreen.

The above five species are all categorized as being compound, alternate, and entire. Other species in this same category include Texas pistache, Western soapberry, wafer ash (hop tree) and the non-native Chinese pistache.

The next four species have compound, alternate, toothed leaves.

The toothache tree, also known as prickly ash or tickle-tongue, is a spiny shrub with two to five inch leaves containing one inch wrinkled, toothed leaflets. It has thorns on the stems and also on the rachis. The leaflets are known to numb your mouth.

The Mexican buckeye is a multi-trunk shrub with 6 to 12 inch leaves, each with 2 to 4 inch long lanceolate, toothed leaflets. It makes pink blooms in clusters before the leaves emerge in March or April. The fruit are large, dark brown, spherical seeds which are encased in three-chambered pods.

Walnuts and pecans are in the same family and have similar leaf characteristics. Both have long (12 inches or longer) leaves with 3 to 7 inch long lanceolate leaflets that sometimes are unsymmetrical and sickle-shaped with toothed margins. Generally, pecans will have larger leaves and larger leaflets, but their sizes overlap.

There are two species of walnuts in the Hill Country. The smaller, more common little walnut or Texas walnut, and the less common larger black walnut. (Some would add the Arizona walnut, which I believe is even less common).

Pecans have 4 part husks that split off from a smooth nut. Walnuts have round, smooth husks that degrade away from rough, irregular nuts. Black walnuts have 2 inch husks and 1 ¼ inch nuts, little walnuts have 1 inch husks and ¾ inch nuts. Arizona walnuts are in between in size. Pecans and black walnuts will likely only be found growing natively in deep rich soils in creek bottoms, while little walnuts can grow in poorer soil away from creeks.

Correction: Last week the caption to the photo left out coral honeysuckle between ligustrum and rough-leaf dogwood. Sorry.

Next week we will conclude this series.

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.