

Guide to Tree and Shrub Identification: Part IX

Last week I discussed the woody species that have compound leaves, alternately arranged, with either entire or toothed margins on the leaflets. Today I will cover species with other types of compound leaves.

The first species is Agarita, a shrub with trifoliate compound leaves (three leaflets attached to a central point). Agarita is a small to medium-sized shrub which has leaflets that are very stiff with five lobes that are extremely sharp so that touching any part of the shrub is difficult. The leaves are green with grey or blue edges. Agarita is evergreen, seldom eaten by deer or livestock, and produces yellow flowers that attract bees in early spring, followed by red berries for the birds.

The next category is plants with twice-pinnate compound leaves arranged alternately along the stem. Twice-pinnate, sometimes called bipinnate, refers to the fact that the leaflets are not attached to the main rachis, but to branches off of the main rachis.

The species with the smallest leaves in this category is the fragrant mimosa, also known as pink mimosa or Lindheimer mimosa. These usually short shrubs have small, one to two inch long leaves, with numerous tiny leaflets on several paired branches. These native mimosas produce pink spherical flowers. The shrubs are armed with numerous short thorns on the stems.

The goldenball leadtree is a small tree with twice-pinnate compound leaves three to eight inches long with three to seven pairs of branches. The oblong leaflets are $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch long. The tree produces bright yellow spherical blooms in spring and sometimes later in the year as well. It is a legume. It does not have thorns.

Mesquite, or honey mesquite, is another species with bipinnate compound leaves with two branches of the rachis at the end of the main rachis, giving a wishbone shape to the leaves. The leaflets are about an inch long and very narrow. The stems have long straight thorns. Mesquite is another legume that produces a yellowish slender bean pod much favored by many animals. It can be a large tree or a multi-trunk shrub. Mesquite prefers deep soil for its long tap root and it can become invasive under certain conditions.

The Chinaberry is a large, invasive exotic tree that has escaped cultivation and colonizes many areas, especially riparian and adjacent areas where it crowds out native vegetation. Its leaves are 1 to 2 feet long with several branches off the main rachis. The dark green leaflets are 1 to 3 inches long and are deeply-toothed or lobed. It produces lavender bloom clusters and $\frac{1}{2}$ inch yellow round fruits which are poisonous.

Other twice-pinnate, compound, alternate trees and shrubs are Roemer's acacia, catclaw acacia, huisache and retama, all well armed with thorns.

Our final category of woody plants is compound, opposite and lobed, and the species that fits that category is the box elder. It has light-green, usually drooping leaves 6 to 15 inches long. The leaflets are frequently trifoliolate with three lobed leaflets at the end of the rachis, but sometimes with other pairs of leaflets on the rachis as well. The three leaflets resemble those of poison ivy, but the opposite arrangement on the stem distinguishes box elder from poison ivy. Box elder is most often found in or near riparian areas and it can be a prolific root sprouter as well as seed producer.

This concludes the plant identification guide of the 70 or so most common woody plants I have seen in the Hill Country.

To review, we started with plants with a vine-like growth habit, then species with simple leaves, alternate arrangement and entire margins, then toothed margins, then lobed margins, then crenate margins. We then considered species with simple leaves with an opposite arrangement. This was followed by compound, alternate, entire leaves, then toothed leaves, followed by the categories discussed today.

So the main thing to remember when looking at an unknown tree or shrub, is to determine the leaf type, arrangement and margin in order to place the species in the right category. From there, one has only a relatively small number of possible species to consider.

I apologize to those readers who were not that interested in identifying woody plants, but the most common question I am asked is "What kind of tree (or shrub) is that? So I know many folks were interested.

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@ktc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.