

Oh! The Joys of Early Spring

The date is March 14. It is 3:30 in the afternoon and the temperature is 78 degrees. We just had ice cream on the porch in short sleeves. Boy, it is nice to live in the Hill Country! Having lived for many years in the cold Northeast, where winter seems to come in early November and doesn't really leave until late April, our weather is truly hard to beat. And having listened to many stories of what folks up there have gone through this winter, it makes me really appreciate our weather.

Of course we have our drawbacks too. My records show only about a third of an inch of rain in the last three months, and only about an inch total in the last four months! Climatological data show that we are in Extreme Drought, the next-to-worst category (Exceptional is the worst.) Droughts don't come with signs or calendars that read "the drought started here" and "the drought is over", but the last few years (and you can argue how far back "a few years" goes) has been rough on Texas and the Hill Country and the farmers and ranchers and landowners and homeowners therein. It should have taught us all how precious water is and will continue to be.

But even in the midst of this severe dryness, and the fact that by definition it is still winter, we have definite signs of spring which cannot help but lift our spirits and give us hope. Here are a few of the signs I have seen around.

Our Mexican plum and Mexican redbud were in full bloom when the last freeze hit, possibly reducing the fruit that would have come later—I guess no one told these shrubs it wasn't spring yet. One peach tree seemed to suffer the same fate, but its partner waited and is now in full bloom. The Texas redbud, usually later than its Mexican cousin, is now in full bloom. Only time will tell if we have seen the last freeze.

Both the red buckeye and its kin the yellow buckeye have fully leafed out. They have to start early as they will drop their leaves in July or August. The possumhaws are all showing leaves, each individual showing a slightly different stage of leaf growth. The Mexican silktassel is blooming.

The Texas wintergrass is growing, but it is also showing signs that it hasn't seen the rain it would really like to have—just kind of stunted so far.

Signs of spring are not limited to our green friends either. I have seen nest building activity from both wrens and chickadees. We had a pair of bluebirds looking over a possible home, but apparently something was not to their liking as they haven't been seen since. The white wing doves are chasing after each other in ways they don't do in other times. A couple of gobblers have discovered a turkey hen that has been frequenting the area near our house and have been vying for her attention with their dueling displays. All signs of spring.

Yesterday, I saw our first hummingbird of the year. We then put out a hummingbird feeder and today I saw a black-chinned hummingbird on it. Another sign of spring is the constant and melodic sounds of dozens of birds proclaiming the coming of spring, or searching for a mate or defending their territories or otherwise just singing for the fun of it.

Early blooms include rosemary, windflowers, coral honeysuckle, low bladderpod and golden groundsel.

The winter rosettes of Engelmann daisy, Mexican hat and bluebonnets are obviously growing now, but haven't begun to put up flower stalks yet. On our place, inside our fence we have lots of vetch growing almost everywhere, but especially in bare areas in the vegetable garden. Many folks would probably consider it an obnoxious weed, but it is a legume and as such it is helping to improve the fertility of the soil. At any rate, it will be dead by the end of June. No vetch appears outside of the fence as it is a deer favorite.

So if you haven't already, go out and take a walk and then repeat it every week or so. This time of year things are changing very fast and you will see something different every time. And that alone will be enough to lift your spirits as you see evidence of new life everywhere.

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.