What a Difference a Fence Makes

I have written several columns this year about my observations from along a nature trail around our little piece of a larger rangeland. This rangeland has been overgrazed by cattle and overbrowsed by deer for some time, and the flora and fauna that is and is not present is a result of these conditions.

But when we built our house, we high-fenced a one-acre area around the house so that we could grow whatever we wanted without interference from our local herbivores. Now, 13 years later, the difference inside and outside the fence is striking.

Of course, much of what is growing inside the fence we intentionally planted (virtually all native plants), but a significant number of volunteer species have also found their way inside the fence. We of course water the flower beds more or less regularly and the planted trees and shrubs occasionally as well using our rainwater, but we don't water the native volunteers. We have a small patch of planted buffalograss "lawn" although it really isn't a lawn anymore as we only mow it once a year and allow wildflowers to grow up in it wherever they wish.

To me the most striking feature inside the fence is the number of volunteer woody plants that we did not plant. We have mature post oaks, blackjack oaks, live oaks and junipers inside the fence, and all of these have given rise to root sprouts or seedlings—the most common being post oaks and blackjacks. But we also have volunteer escarpment black cherry, hackberry, gum bumelia, prairie flame-leaf sumac (one almost 15 feet tall), Virginia creeper and grape vine, all native but not growing anywhere near the house.

We planted a single possumhaw, but now have almost a dozen more scattered inside the fence, all planted by the birds. Likewise, we have two mesquite bushes we planted, but we now have a volunteer mesquite. We had a beautiful goldenball leadtree that died, but left behind several little ones.

Several things have spread, some more than we wanted. Rough-leaf dogwood root sprouts to form thickets—one, we have cut back, one we have let grow. The creek plum is also a prolific root sprouter, but the Mexican plum is less so. The Blanco crabapple is beginning to form a thicket also. Shrubs that have not produced any progeny include both the Texas and Mexican redbuds, Carolina buckthorn, Mexican buckeye, retama, yaupon, Mexican silktassel, amorpha, Texas mountain laurel, American beautyberry and buttonbush.

Walking around looking for things in bloom at the end of June, I came up with the following list. Indian blanket, Engelmann daisy, pink evening primrose, greenthread, horsemint, Mexican hat, American basket-flower, Illinois bundleflower, retama, rose

pavonia, purple coneflower, woolly ironweed, Texas lantana (the native one), winecup, common sunflower, yarrow, Mexican oregano, Simpson rosinweed, and Gregg's mist flower covered in queen butterflies.

Native grasses seeding out included sideoats grama, Texas grama, switchgrass (2-3 feet tall), silver bluestem (2 feet tall with 4 foot tall seed heads), eastern gamagrass (in beautiful bloom), and KR bluestem. Grasses having just finished their seed production include Canada wildrye, rescuegrass, Japanese brome, and Texas wintergrass.

Obviously the plant diversity and habitat are much different inside the fence than outside, mainly because of the protection from the grazers and browsers outside. But also because of the variety of native plants we have planted as well as the volunteers that have successfully established themselves inside the fence.

This vastly improved native habitat, coupled with a small shallow recirculating water feature, several bird feeders and bird houses also makes for a greatly increased number of birds and small animals frequenting the yard than would be seen in any equal-sized area outside the fence.

So, other than the enjoyment we derive from living in the middle of this improved habitat, is this small area providing any benefit to the larger surrounding area? The answer is yes, somewhat. The plants that produce seed inside the fence provide a local seed source of native plants that can propagate outside the fence and beyond if not eaten. Some of the native plants we have planted are declining in the wild (such as the Blanco crabapple and rusty blackhaw viburnam) and we are helping to maintain their genetic viability. And finally, the birds and other animals that use our yard even occasionally have easier lives due to the existence of our yard.

So, make your space a native habitat and help preserve our Hill Country flora and fauna.

Until next time…

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