

The Backyard Cedar Tree

When we built our house, the exact location and orientation seemed obvious, except the view from the back porch would have been into a patch of cedar mostly clustered under a few nice post oaks. So one of the first things we did was to remove most of them so we would have a less obstructed view of the pasture beyond.

But we left one cedar. Unlike all of the cedars that we removed, which were what is usually referred to as “regrowth” cedar, multi-trunk bushes mostly less than 12-15 feet tall, the one we kept was what most people would call an “old growth” cedar. It has a single trunk, about 18 inches in diameter with the lower branches being about 6 feet off the ground. It is between 30 and 35 feet tall.

It is not what most people would describe as an attractive tree. It is not symmetrical. It has some bare spots, some broken limbs and a few dead branches. But it has become, along with an equal-sized post oak, the dominant feature in our back yard and we are quite fond of it.

On one side, the cedar’s outer branches are almost over the low end of the recirculating creek I built a few years ago and which attracts many birds as both a source of drinking water and also a place to bathe in. The squirrels seem drink from it several times a day. We have a suet feeder hanging from the cedar, a bird feeder for sunflower seeds hanging from the post oak (well, the squirrels think it is a squirrel feeder sometimes), and we have a platform feeder for sunflower seeds not too far from both trees. So there is a lot of wildlife activity in the area of the old cedar tree.

The birds, especially the shy ones, like to sit in the cedar and scout the area before coming down to drink or bathe, and especially after bathing, most birds with wet wings just want to get somewhere safe to dry off their wings, and the cedar is the perfect place for that. In the summer, the few dead twigs here and there make ideal perches for hummingbirds to sit between trips to their feeders.

The outermost limbs of both the cedar and the post oak come to within about two feet of overlapping, but this just makes it fun for the squirrels to jump from one tree to the other so they can travel without getting on the ground. Because of the overlapping limbs of the post oaks and blackjacks to the north, squirrels can travel through the trees well over a hundred feet to reach the cedar and come down to get a drink without being on the ground for more than about 6 or 8 feet.

Underneath the cedar we have a collection of volunteer, native woody plants. These include a hackberry, a gum bumelia, an escarpment black cherry, a live oak and a greenbrier. These have all appeared since we built the high fence and no longer have any deer or other browsers to eat them. Since the cedar is a male, we have not had any small cedars come up under it, as we might have if it were a female.

We don’t have any lawn grass under the tree, just whatever Mother Nature puts there on her own. In the winter, it is usually rescue grass, a common non-native annual cool

season grass, as well as some vetch. Later in the year these will be replaced with a mixture of native grasses and a few wildflowers.

The most important aspect of this big old cedar, and the post oak next to it, is that we can sit on the back porch in the morning with a cup of coffee, or take an ice-cream break in the afternoon and enjoy both seeing and hearing numerous birds and watching the antics of the squirrels almost constantly. This is really the reason we wanted to live in the country in the first place. It wouldn't have been nearly as enjoyable or interesting if we had removed that old cedar when we removed the others.

Be careful what you get rid of, you might regret it later.

Until next time...

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