

The Most Common Grasses of the Hill Country.

Historically, one might think the most common grasses would include the Big Four of the Tall Grass Prairie, little bluestem, big bluestem, switchgrass and Indiangrass. But most of our part of the Hill Country was not part of the Tall Grass Prairie and that was 150 + years ago. Today, little bluestem is certainly one of the most common grasses, switchgrass is common along creeks and less so in uplands, Indiangrass is more common along roadsides and fencerows than out in the open pasture, and big bluestem is quite rare on most properties.

Cool season grasses begin growing in December or January, have seed heads up by April or earlier and begin to go dormant by early June. The most common native cool-season grasses are Texas wintergrass (speargrass), Canada wildrye, Scribner's panicum, and little barley. In addition, we have three introduced cool-season grasses, rescuegrass, Japanese brome and downy brome (cheatgrass). Switchgrass grows a lot of leaf foliage by the end of May, but doesn't seed out until late summer.

The vast majority of all native grasses are bunch grasses as opposed to turf grasses or lawn grasses. The most common warm-season bunchgrasses, which make up the majority of the grass cover of our grasslands and savannas include: cane bluestem, fall witchgrass, green sprangletop, Hall panicum, little bluestem, meadow dropseed, plains/prairie lovegrass, purple threeawn, roundseed dichanthelium, sideoats grama, silver bluestem, slim tridens, Southwest bristlegrass, tall grama, Texas cupgrass, white tridens, windmillgrass, and yellow Indiangrass.

The most common introduced warm-season grasses one is likely to encounter are: bermudagrass, dallisgrass, Johnsongrass, Kleingrass, and King Ranch (KR) bluestem.

A number of grasses that are usually, but not always, found in riparian areas and along the banks of permanent or near-permanent water or at least wetter areas: bushy bluestem, eastern gamagrass, Lindheimer muhly, and the non-native vaseygrass. (These areas frequently have a collection of sedges and rushes as well.)

There are a very few turf grasses native to the Hill Country, buffalograss, curly mesquite and to some extent vine mesquite. All of these grasses expand their territory by stolons and the former two both grow to only a few inches high, thus making for a turf/lawn. Buffalograss and curly mesquite are commonly sold as seeds or sod for low water, low maintenance lawn grasses.

Severely overgrazed pastures may be missing most of the larger bunch grasses listed above because they have been grazed out. On such properties, one usually finds only grasses that are either not eaten by livestock, produce very little forage, or grow close to the ground predominating over better forage grasses. The most common of these grasses are: buffalograss, curly mesquite, hairy grama, hairy tridens, purple threeawn, Texas grama, windmillgrass.

The above lists of my idea of the most common grasses in our part of the Hill Country. It should be noted that there are only about 45 grasses in the above lists. The book "Grasses of the Texas Hill Country" by Brian and Shirley Loflin lists about 75 grasses. The book "Common Texas Grasses" by Frank Gould lists his version of the most common grasses statewide, and he lists about 150 grasses. But the new "bible" of Texas grasses, "Guide to Texas Grasses" by Robert Shaw, lists some 750 grasses known to be in Texas.

So my lists are only a minor collection of many, many more grasses. It would not therefore, be unexpected that everyone would have at least one grass on their property that I have not listed.

Grasses are an important plant group. They are the third largest plant family for flowering plants. (And yes, they do flower, just not always conspicuously.) Two-thirds of the land surface of the earth is covered with grass, one-third is classified as grasslands. One estimate is that there are more individual grass plants on earth than all other vascular plants combined.

Photos of most of the grasses mentioned above can be found on the ecology page of my website, www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.

Until next time...

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