

Native Woody Plants with Long Bloom Periods

When most folks think about blooms in the Hill Country, what most often comes to mind are the showy spring flowers like bluebonnet, Indian blanket, Engelmann daisy and pink evening primrose, and/or spring blooming trees such as the redbuds, mountain laurels, and plums. And no one can deny that all of the above certainly add to the beauty of the Hill Country.

But there are a number of native woody plants that have long bloom periods, either continuous bloomers or those that bloom multiple times during the year following rains. I thought of a number of such species, but in order to be a little more thorough I decided to look through Jan Wrede's book, "Trees, Shrubs and Vines of the Texas Hill Country", and find all the species that can be counted on to bloom over more than a three-month period.

The trees and larger shrubs that have longer bloom periods include the following:

Desert willow, a wispy, xeric, small tree native to the western Edwards Plateau and points to further west to California and Mexico. It produces lavender, orchid-like blooms in response to rains in late spring and throughout the summer.

Golden ball lead tree is another small tree that can survive drier places from the western Edwards Plateau westward. It is common on the South Llano River SNA. It has bipinnately compound leaves and starts blooming in early spring with 1 inch spherical yellow balls and occasionally throughout the summer after rains.

Kidneywood is a multi-trunk shrub to 15 feet tall with tiny compound leaves. Deer love it but many individuals still survive. It produces clusters of white flowers on terminal spires, again after rains. In severe drought times, it can lose its leaves and then regrow them when rains return.

Beebush or Whitebrush is another open, airy shrub native to the Hill Country. It produces white flowers on terminal spikes after rains much like Kidneywood.

Cenizo, or purple sage, is a shrub with small, dense, gray-green leaves. It is also native to the western and southern edge of the Hill Country. It produces dense purple blooms covering most of the shrub. And no, it does not predict rain, it responds to it.

Retama is an interesting small tree or large shrub with green bark and tiny green leaflets attached to green rachis, which can drop in dry times and regrow after rains. It blooms after rains spring through summer with 1 inch yellow five petal blooms. This south Texas tree ranges up to the southern Hill Country. Unlike all of the above species, retama has very sharp paired thorns.

Some smaller shrubs which also have long bloom periods include:

Damianita, a low, rounded shrub with small dark green leaves and small yellow flowers covering the whole shrub. Black dalea is a small, loose shrub with compound leaves

and tiny gray-green leaflets. It makes pea-like purple blooms distributed all over the shrub several times a year. Turks cap is a perennial which dies back partially in the winter but retains some woody base. It can grow to several feet tall with large, heart-shaped leaves. It makes red blooms that look as though the red petals are wrapped around each other.

Texas lantana, the native lantana, ("New Gold" or other cultivars are not) is usually a low shrub with bloom clusters composed of many smaller flowers some of which are red, some orange and some yellow.

There are a number of vines which bloom over a several-month period. Here is a list:

Coral honeysuckle is a native vine that blooms from early spring until late fall with long red tube-shaped blossoms terminated in yellow.

Pearl milkweed is a delicate vine with heart-shaped leaves and greenish blooms that appear to have a pearl in the center.

Trumpet creeper has pinnate compound leaves and blooms with red tubular blossoms.

Wild morning glory has three-lobed leaves and 2 inch pink blooms with purple centers.

Passion flower vine (there are several species) have heart- or multilobed-shaped leaves and incredibly intricate blooms, usually purple.

Snapdragon vine is a fragile, low growing vine with small triangular leaves and purple and white blooms.

All of these blooming woody species are an important addition to our native habitat which also includes numerous species of wildflowers blooming throughout the year. We need blooms throughout the year to feed all of our native pollinators; butterflies, bees, flies, wasps, moths, beetles, etc.

Until next time...

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the books "Hill Country Landowner's Guide" and "A Beginner's Handbook for Rural Texas Landowners: How to Live in the Country Without Spoiling It". He can be reached at jstmn@kctc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.