Our Late Summer Rains Were Great for Our Fall Bloomers

Mention Texas wildflowers to most people and they usually conjure up visions of bluebonnets, Indian paintbrush (Texas paintbrush), Indian blanket (gaillardia), pink evening primrose, Engelmann daisy, and maybe white prickly poppy. But these are all spring bloomers and are usually gone by June.

To my mind, equally impressive, especially after a dry summer, are the fall blooming wildflowers. All the rains we got in August certainly awakened a lot of them.

The purple spires of our liatris (gay-feather) are striking against the green vegetation. The six-foot tall maximilian sunflower really stands out in the landscape, especially when a whole colony begins to bloom at the same time. Interestingly, these sunflowers bloom from the top first and then those flowers lower down the stem begin to bloom.

The common sunflowers were just about bloomed out in mid-summer and appeared to be about to die when the August rains came. They are now blooming prolifically again and we even have some new plants coming up in the last few weeks. The bush sunflowers are in their maximum bloom after the rains.

In the spring and early summer, the blue mist flower was reacting to the spring rains with many, many blooms, most covered by queen butterflies. The blooms and the butterflies really decreased in mid-summer, but both the blooms and the butterflies are back in force now.

Two usual fall bloomers, fall obedient plant and fall aster are doing very well now after the rains, as are the snow-on-the-mountain and frostweed, both good pollinator species.

A number of wildflowers that bloomed earlier in the year are now blooming again after the rains. These include damianita, zexmenia, Texas lantana, mealy blue sage, and Mexican oregano. Straggler daisy around our place appeared to go totally dormant and/or died back to the ground in the summer, but has come back nicely in the past few weeks.

The last few weeks has seen our kidneywood covered with blooms like we have never seen before.

All of the above certainly underscores the variety and complexity of Mother Nature. The spring bloomers need spring insects to pollinate them to propagate the species, and likewise the spring insects need the spring blooms. Ditto the fall bloomers and fall insects.

Most annuals die soon after blooming and the next generation must await seed germination next year. Some perennials bloom whenever there is rain, some bloom as early as possible and some wait all year to bloom.

The point is that our natural world is very diverse. Many different species with many different properties and life cycles have evolved together so that at any given place at any given moment there will be numerous plants at different stages of their life cycle. And those plants will be joined by many different insects at different stages in their life cycles and all of these species will in turn be joined by different higher animals, etc. etc.

And we humans are certainly part of that diversity of species. We certainly have the greatest impact on the other species, but we are also the only species to be able to appreciate and learn about all of the other wondrous things we share our environment with.

I think one of the most fascinating things about nature is that it is never constant, never the same, but always changing. What is blooming now will not be blooming at some time in the future. The condition of the grass, the forbs, the trees, will be different this time next year than it is now, just as the conditions now are different than they were last year. I think that is one of the things that make nature so interesting and fun to watch.

But I guess it kind of goes against human nature. Judging by the way most people maintain their yards, we humans tend to want things to be neat, orderly and well maintained—all the time. And maybe the reason many folks view natural areas as being messy or unkempt has to do with the fact that natural areas are always changing.

But if all flowers bloomed all the time, we would eventually become so used to seeing them bloom that we would no longer appreciate them. Nature would become boring.

The most important characteristic of a healthy native habitat is diversity—diversity of plant and animal species that have diverse life cycles in diverse seasons. Which is why nature is never boring.

Until next time…

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