

Our Most Common Hill Country Trees

There are a lot of things that make the Hill Country a great place to live: the climate, the beautiful countryside, the hills, the trees, the creeks and rivers. But I think the things that we have the most up-close-and-personal attachment to are our large trees. Most of us have favorite species, and/or a favorite individual tree, or we did when we were kids.

I don't know that there are any official numbers, but I am pretty sure that the most numerous large tree in the Hill Country is the live oak (more specifically, the plateau live oak, *Quercus fusiformis*). It is unusual among oaks in that it is semi-evergreen, meaning it keeps its leaves in the winter but then loses them in the spring as the new leaves come out. It is a slow-growing, long-lived, strong tree that often can be found growing in groups called motts.

Other common oaks in the Hill Country include the blackjack, post, bur, Lacey, and Spanish oaks. Blackjack oaks are medium sized, have dark bark and smooth, shiny leaves. Post oaks have strong, straight trunks with a light bark and slightly rough leaves. Bur oaks have very large leaves and large acorns. Lacey oaks have a slightly blue-green color. Spanish oaks have deeply incised leaves.

There are two classifications of oaks; red oaks and white oaks. The only two red oaks in the Hill Country are the blackjack oak and the Spanish oak (or Texas red oak). All the rest are white oaks. Red oaks have bristles on the tips of the leaves and the acorns take two years to mature. White oak leaves have no bristles and the acorns mature in one year.

Cedar elms tend to be large, strong, trees with rough bark and small, rough leaves. They are unusual for large trees in that they bloom in the fall.

Escarpment black cherry is a large tree with dark bark with small patches of silver. Small trees and new limbs have smooth, light colored bark with dark bands. They are somewhat susceptible to wind damage, but they regrow broken limbs readily. The fruit is clusters of very small cherries.

There are two species of hackberry in the Hill Country, netleaf and sugarberry. They are both characterized by having bumps or "warts" on the trunk and somewhat rough leaves. Often called a "trash tree", but from a naturalist and native-habitat standpoint they are very desirable trees that are utilized by many different species of wildlife.

Native pecans tend to be found growing only in deep soil, frequently in alluvial soil along creek bottoms. There is very little "meat" in native pecans, thus the prevalence of improved varieties for human consumption.

Two species of large trees that are found almost exclusively along creeks and rivers are bald cypress and sycamore. Bald cypress is unusual for a conifer in that it is deciduous. The cypress tree, along with the other large riparian tree, the sycamore, are important

parts of any riparian area for being essential for holding soil and dissipating energy during floods. The latter are especially good at germinating and growing to maturity along and in creek bottoms and providing trapped sediment for other vegetation to take hold.

Many of the big trees listed above are declining in the Hill Country due to our overabundant deer populations which are eating all the young sprouts of most woody plants. This lack of replacement of hardwoods as well as the loss of shrubs and vines is altering the native habitat in many areas, and not in a good way.

Unfortunately, since juniper is about the last thing that white-tailed deer like to eat, the population and replacement of junipers doesn't seem to be declining at all. The bottom line is that with few wildfires and too many deer, the future looks to be one with fewer hardwoods and more cedar.

Do I have a favorite tree? Actually I have two. In our back yard just off our back porch, we have a very beautiful large post oak and next to it is a very large old-growth cedar which is anything but beautiful. But when we have our morning coffee, or an afternoon ice cream break on the back porch, we can watch all of the bird activity between our artificial wildlife "creek", the feeders, and these two trees. Or we can watch the squirrels jumping from one tree to another. It is just what we came here for.

Until next time...

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