

## Trees: Special Parts of Our Lives

When you are driving down the road in the Hill Country, what you mostly see out your window, covering the ground, are trees. You probably don't see individual trees so much as the whole collection. Sure, we see wildflowers at times and in places we see grasslands or savannas which are mixed grasses and trees.

But when you are not traveling down the road at 70 miles per hour, but taking a leisurely walk or even just sitting on your back porch, you are likely seeing individual trees and noticing whatever there is about an individual tree that attracts your attention. And chances are that the more often you notice the tree or spend time looking at it, the more it means to you, the more important it is to you. Some of us, sometimes, fall in love with a tree.

When I was growing up in the High Plains of Texas, the tallest "trees" were mesquite bushes usually less than about 10 feet tall. Driving down the road, you could always tell where the farm houses were because they were under the only real trees on the horizon—mostly planted, non-native Chinese elms. We had one in our yard.

My point is that individual trees can be something special to people in a way that individual flowers or grasses are not. I could easily draw a map of every single tree in our one-acre yard, without even looking out the window, and I can recall the species and most of the features of each of the 40 or so trees in the yard.

What got me to thinking about this was an article in National Geographic about special trees around the world. Here are some of the "special" trees discussed in the article.

The oldest living things include bristlecone pines in the mountainous west—one in California was documented to be 4,789 years old in 1957 and is still alive. Another in Nevada was unfortunately cut down in 1964 and then found to be 4,862 years old.

There is a tree in Lincolnshire, England that is called the "gravity tree" because it was under that apple tree that Sir Isaac Newton, began developing his law of gravity in 1752. In 1820 a storm blew the tree over, but it remained rooted and is still alive today.

There is a Montezuma cypress tree in Oaxaca, Mexico that is 38 feet in diameter—119 feet in circumference! The Mexican government rerouted the Pan American Highway and dug a water well solely to protect the tree from car exhaust and a falling water table.

There is a quaking aspen in Fishlake National Forest in Utah that covers 106 acres and is estimated to weigh 13 million pounds! OK, so it wouldn't look like one tree if you were there because what you would see would be around 47,000 tree trunks. But it is just one root system, probably originally from a "mother" tree that is no longer there, but all of the "trunks" are attached to that one root system—they are actually all clones of the original.

We can see live oak motts in the Hill Country that could easily cover a half acre or more, all attached to a common root system—we have 5 small live oaks in the corner of our yard that are undoubtedly only one “tree”.

And then there is a tree that is not really that old. It was a pear tree that was about 35 or 40 feet tall growing near the World Trade Center on 9/11/2001. After everything was cleared, the last living thing rescued from the wreckage was this tree, burned on one side. It is still alive and referred to as the “Survivor Tree.”

The point of all of this is that trees are special parts of our world and our lives in a way that most other plants are not. Which is reason enough to protect the ones we have. Mostly, our native trees don’t need any “help” from us other than to not make any change that could damage or destroy the native habitat around them.

One exception to that is if oak wilt threatens a favorite live oak. I know people who have decided against treatments that might have saved a live oak because of the expense, only to later spend even more to have the dead tree removed.

And it is OK if sometimes you feel like hugging your tree.

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@ktc.com](mailto:jstmn@ktc.com). Previous columns can be seen at [www.hillcountrynaturalist.org](http://www.hillcountrynaturalist.org).