

Buckeyes: An Interesting Group of Native Plants

Sometimes it is fun to explore one small segment of nature in detail just because it is interesting. That is what led me to study the buckeyes in the Hill Country.

There are four species of native shrubs or small trees in Texas with common names of buckeye. Three closely-related species are the Texas buckeye or white buckeye (*Aesculus glabra* var. *arguta*) found from this area to NE Texas and beyond, the Yellow buckeye (*Aesculus pavia* var. *flavescens*) the most common in the western part of the Hill Country, and the Red buckeye (*Aesculus pavia* var. *pavia*) found predominately in the eastern part of the Hill Country into east Texas. Mexican buckeye (*Ungnadia speciosa*), not botanically related to the others, is common throughout a large part of central and west Texas.

All three *Aesculus* species have palmately compound leaves (having 5, sometimes 7 - 9 or more) leaflets radiating from a central stem tip like fingers on a hand), and all three produce seeds in a semi-triangular, three compartment seed pod, containing three hard, shiny round seeds. All three species are very poisonous if ingested. It is said that Native Americans ground up the seeds to drop in water to stun fish.

The Texas buckeye is most easily distinguished from the other two *Aesculus* species by usually having more and narrower leaflets and having spiny, more spherical seed capsules rather than the smooth, triangular seed capsules of the red and yellow buckeyes. The yellow and red buckeyes can be distinguished from each other by the color of the flowers. All three *Aesculus* species produce tubular flowers on a terminal stalk.

All three *Aesculus* species have an unusual growth pattern. They grow new leaves in February and are fully leafed out by the first of March. Then they lose their leaves in mid-to late summer. Many a homeowner has become distressed to find their newly planted buckeye to have lost all of its leaves in August.

Interestingly, we have another species of shrub in the Hill Country that is called a buckeye, the Mexican buckeye. One might suspect that it is related to the other three discussed above, especially when I say that it produces a triangular seed pod very similar to the red and yellow buckeyes.

But the Mexican buckeye, *Ungnadia speciosa*, is in a completely different family, the Spinadaceae of soapberry family. The other three buckeyes are in the Horse-Chestnut family.

Mexican buckeye is distinguished by having odd pinnately compound leaves (leaflets arranged in pairs along a leaf stem) up to 12 inches long with 5 to 9 leaflets. It has showy pink blossoms up and down the axils of the stems in early spring. The Mexican buckeye does not put out new leaves until spring and it keeps its leaves until late fall. The seeds of this species are also poisonous if ingested. Mexican buckeye is fairly common in the Hill Country and it grows throughout much of Texas, including far West Texas and the Big bend area.

Mexican buckeye can usually be found in nurseries and my experience is that it is easy to grow. Red and Yellow buckeyes are somewhat less commonly found, but they can be grown most places also.

Buckeyes make up only one small fraction of the native small trees and shrubs that can be found in the Hill Country—we are lucky to have so many.

Until next time...

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