

Native Hill Country Vines: Sometimes Forgotten Parts of the Landscape

When most people list the categories of plants in the Hill Country, they usually include trees, shrubs, grasses and wildflowers, but they seldom mention vines. Somehow, when one mentions vines, a jungle comes to mind, not our semi-arid region. Maybe it is just too many Tarzan movies when we were kids. Anyway, we have lots of vines here as well, and here are some of them.

One of my books lists 60 species of grape (*Vitis* spp.) known in Texas. Not all grow in the Hill Country, but many do. The most distinctive species is Mustang grape (*Vitis mustangensis*), which is most common in Gillespie County and north and east of there. It is distinguished by having inrolled (curved downward) leaves that are somewhat duller green than other grapes on top but totally white from minute hairs on the bottom. Because the underside of the leaf sometimes shows, one can identify this grape driving down the road. They sometimes cover fencelines and small trees with their dense foliage.

The other local grape species have common names such as Spanish grape or mountain grape and have the characteristic wide grape leaf with jagged edges and no white hairs underneath. All native grapes produce fruit, but in nearly all cases it is much smaller and in smaller bunches than you would buy in the grocery store. But the birds and small animals love them.

Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*), also in the grape family, is a very distinctive vine with palmately compound leaves (think of spreading the fingers of your hand, each finger representing one of the five leaflets, with all the leaflets attached at your palm). It produces small blue fruits and the leaves turn bright red in the fall. Considered a good understory plant.

Greenbrier, (*Smilax bona-nox*) is a common understory vine with triangular or heart-shaped leathery leaves. It usually has thorns or prickles, sometimes all over, including the leaves, but sometimes only a few along the stem. The leaves stay on well into the winter and are good high-protein deer food. Berries in clusters turn dark blue in the fall. Because of the thorns and the tangled way the vine grows, it is considered a nuisance by many people.

Southern dewberry, (*Rubus trivialis*) is a low-growing vine with compound leaves with oval leaflets. It blooms white in the spring and makes black berries that are edible in early summer. This is a common shade-loving low vine that grows throughout the eastern US. The stems have short prickles.

I would judge the above vines to be the most often encountered around our area, but there are several more native Hill Country vines.

Poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*) doesn't seem to be nearly as common around here as it is in most of the US north and east of here. Applying the "leaves of three" rule often incorrectly identifies box elder tree sprouts as poison ivy, but the latter are alternatively arranged on the stems. When climbing a tree, it often puts out tiny "rootlets" from the stem that attach themselves to the bark. In spite of its toxic properties, deer eat it and birds like the berries it produces.

Coral honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*), is a great landscape plant that has red tubular blooms from very early spring into late fall and attracts hummingbirds. Other birds like the fruit as well. Please don't confuse this native honeysuckle with the exotic invasive Japanese honeysuckle.

Another good landscape plant is Cow-itch vine or Ivy treebine (*Cissus incise*). This vine has thick leathery leaves with two deep indentations that give some the impression of three leaves. This vine, which is also in the grape family, has unusual foliage texture and produces berries that the birds like.

Scarlet leatherflower (*Clematis texensis*) is endemic to the Hill Country, known to grow only in 7 counties. This somewhat delicate vine grows in dappled shade and produces small red bell-shaped flowers. Its cousin, Purple leatherflower (*Clematis pitcheri*) likes to grow in moist, shady areas.

Pearl milkweed vine (*Matelea reticulata*) is a thin-stemmed vine with heart-shaped leaves that produces a small greenish five-petal flower with what looks like a pearl in the center.

Carolina snailseed (*Cocculus carolinus*) looks very much like Greenbrier, but without the thorns. There are several Passionflower vines (*Passiflora* spp.) that produce spectacular ornate blooms. Other vines include trumpet creeper, crossvine, snapdragon vine, old man's beard, morning glory, Texas bindweed, and probably some I haven't thought of.

Until next time...

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