

More Common Hill Country Shrubs

In previous columns I have discussed native evergreen shrubs and shrubs most often found in shady, wetter areas of the Hill Country. There are lots of native shrubs that don't fit into either of those categories, and here are some of them.

Sumacs: There are quite a few species of sumacs in Texas, and three that are common in the Hill Country: Flameleaf sumac, Fragrant sumac, and Evergreen sumac. The latter was discussed in an earlier column. Flameleaf sumac, or Prairie flameleaf sumac (*Rhus lanceolata*) usually grows as a multi-trunk small tree with long compound leaves composed of 10-15 or more pairs of narrow leaflets. Its small white flowers are clustered on the end of branches which produce berries that turn from red in the fall to brown in winter. Many species of birds and mammals eat these berries. The leaves turn a brilliant red in the fall.

Fragrant sumac, aka Skunkbush sumac or Aromatic sumac (*Rhus aromatica*) is a small shrub, usually less than about 8 feet, with trifoliate compound leaves (leaves composed of three leaflets growing from the end of a stem). The leaves give a pungent odor when crushed, thus the name. Its small flowers appear as clusters at the end of branches before the leaves appear. The fruit is clusters of small red, fuzzy berries that ripen in the summer.

Possumhaw or Deciduous holly (*Ilex decidua*) can be a large shrub or small tree. It has simple one to two inch leaves tapered at the base and rounded at the end, frequently bunched at the tips of short branches. Small white flowers appear in early spring. Red berries are produced only on female plants and are clustered along the main branches. The fruit usually persists well into the winter and is quite conspicuous with all the leaves gone. Possumhaws are commonly available in nurseries, and tend to grow best as understory plants rather than in full sun.

Desert willow (*Chilopsis linearis*) is a small tree from the western edge of the Hill Country and westward. Desert willows are airy trees with long, narrow leaves that grow in full sun, even in the West Texas desert. They bloom throughout the summer after rains with beautiful pink and purple orchid-like flowers and produce long, very thin bean-like pods. It is a good landscape tree for well-drained areas.

Rough leaf dogwood (*Cornus drummondii*) is a spreading shrub or small tree with a pronounced tendency to produce root sprouts which can mature into thickets. The simple leaves are 1-4 inches long and about half as wide, with a pointed tip. The leaves are somewhat rough with prominent veins. Rough leaf dogwood blooms in the spring and produces white berries which ripen in late summer or early fall. This fast-growing shrub usually does best as an understory plant. The more showy flowering dogwood which grows throughout the eastern US does not do well here.

There are three species of Redbud in Texas. The Eastern redbud grows from just east of here and throughout the eastern half of the US. The Mexican redbud grows natively in the Trans-Pecos region, although it will grow just fine in this area if planted. The redbud native to this area is the Texas redbud (*Cercis canadensis* var. *texensis*). It has the same general appearance of the Eastern redbud except the leaves are smaller and somewhat thicker. It blooms with pink flowers in early spring before the leaves come out, giving areas where they are common a beautiful pink hue. They produce reddish-brown leguminous seed pods. This is a popular fast-growing landscape tree. The Eastern redbud does not grow well in our limestone soils.

Texas kidneywood (*Eysenhardtia texana*) is a multi-trunk, irregularly-shaped shrub with compound leaves with many tiny (about ¼-inch long) leaflets. Its flowers are small white blossoms in spikes at the end of branches that attract native bees. Flowering can occur anytime summer or fall after a rain. During drought periods, the kidneywood can drop its leaves and then regrow them after a rain. The seed pods produced are very small. This shrub looks like something that should be growing in South Texas and have thorns, but it doesn't have any thorns.

Most of the above shrubs will be eaten by hungry deer.

Until next time...

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