

Native Evergreens Help Soften Our Winter Landscape

When we think of winter, we usually think of bare trees, dry grass and lack of flowers, and compared to the other seasons, winter is certainly that. But all is not just gray and brown—we still have a lot of native green things around in the winter. Here are some of them.

Texas mountain laurel (*Sophora secundiflora*), also called Mescal Bean, is an evergreen shrub usually 4 to 8' tall with compound, dark-green leaves with shiny leaflets 1 to 2" long. It has large showy purplish flowers in the early spring that smell like grape Kool-Aid. It produces a gray seed pod with red seeds which ripen in late summer. Both the leaves and the seeds contain an alkaloid that is toxic to livestock and humans when ingested. Deer will avoid this plant.

Cenizo, or Texas sage (*Leucophyllum frutescens*) is a 4 to 10' shrub with very small silver-grey leaves. It usually flowers around 7 to 10 days after a good rain, covering the whole shrub with lavender blooms that attract hoards of native bees. More common south and west of here, they require little if any extra water. Cenizo is not a deer favorite.

Evergreen sumac (*Rhus virens*), is another evergreen plant with shiny green compound leaves. It produces tiny white blooms in clusters in the summer, especially after good rains. It can attain a height up to 12', but may have leaves down to the ground. It may not be eaten by deer.

Agarita (*Berberis trifoliata*) is a common Hill Country shrub with compound leaves consisting of three very stiff leaflets, each with 3 to 5 very sharp points. They produce small, fragrant, yellow flowers in early spring that are a favorite with native bees. The red berries ripen in late spring and some people make jelly from them. Agarita shrubs make good "nursery plants" by keeping browsers away with their sharp leaves, thus allowing young hardwood trees to grow up inside the shrubs without being eaten. Mature leaves are not eaten by deer.

Texas madrone (*Arbutus xalapensis*) is the distinctive shrub or small tree with the peeling bark revealing a smooth reddish or tan bark. Its leaves are dark green and leathery, its flowers are white clusters in early spring followed by small red berries. It's native range in the Hill Country is limited to Real, Bandera, Kendall and parts of adjacent counties. It can be very difficult to grow. In Big Bend's Chisos mountains there are places where madrones grow into large spectacular trees. Because of deer browsing, one usually only finds small madrones growing up inside cedar bushes or other protective vegetation.

Cedar, or Ashe juniper, (*Juniperus ashei*) is certainly the most common evergreen shrub in the Hill Country. It is dioecious, which means male and female flowers are produced on separate plants. The female plants bear the blue berry-like cones which are eaten by many species of wildlife. Cedar is eaten by deer only when there is little else for them to eat. Many species of wildlife use cedar thickets for cover, especially in winter.

Autumn sage, (*Salvia greggii*) is a native shrub that is widely available in various flower colors and thus is a favorite of many gardeners. It can bloom throughout much of the year and the blooms attract butterflies, bees and other insects.

Coral honeysuckle, (*Lonicera sempervirens*) is an evergreen climbing native vine that produces coral-red flowers and bright red fruit. Ours routinely begins blooming in February and sometimes in January. Since birds frequently scatter the seeds, it is not uncommon to find this “vine” growing where there is nothing to climb on so it sort of “climbs on itself” and makes a nice “shrub-like” plant.

Mexican silk-tassel, (*Garrya ovata*), is a large evergreen shrub with thick leathery oval dark-green leaves. It is dioecious with the male flowers the most noticeable. The fruit are in purple-black clusters. It is not a deer favorite.

Yaupon holly, (*Ilex vomitoria*) is evergreen and also has red berries on the stems in the winter. Most holly berries are poisonous.

In addition, we can't forget all of the prickly pears and for that matter all cacti and succulents which are evergreens and give some color to the winter landscape.

Finally many of our spring wildflowers are in their “rosette” stage with a cluster of green leaves near the ground just waiting for the first indications of spring. Some examples are Engelmann daisy and Mexican hat.

Until next time...

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Caption: “Green Texas mountain laurel contrasting with bare post oak limbs in January.”