

Our Hill Country Winters are Semi-Green

When most people think of the winter landscape, they tend to think of brown, dead-looking foliage. While a lot of our trees, shrubs and perennials do in fact lose their leaves in the winter, we in the Hill Country have greener winters than folks in many other parts of the country.

Most of the greenery we see in the winter is due to our two most common woody plants, juniper and live oaks, and since these two species make up so much of our landscape, our winters are not as dreary as some other places. Mexican white oak, which is not locally native but grows in Val Verde County and into Mexico, and is commonly planted in this area, has leaves that persist into the spring like live oaks.

But those are not the only evergreens we have, so sprinkled among the junipers and live oaks are many other green shrubs. Here are some of them.

Texas Mountain Laurel, 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. Deer will avoid this plant.

Cenizo, or Texas Sage, 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. Cenizo is not a deer favorite.

Evergreen Sumac is another plant with shiny green compound leaves. It produces tiny white blooms in clusters in the summer, especially after good rains. May be eaten, but not a deer favorite.

Agarita is a common Hill Country shrub with compound leaves consisting of three very stiff leaflets, each with 3 to 5 very sharp points. Agarita produces small, fragrant, yellow flowers in early spring that are a favorite with native bees. Not usually eaten by deer. The red berries ripen in late spring and some people make jelly from them. The birds like them too.

Texas Madrone is a distinctive shrub or small tree with 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.

Mexican Silktassel is another multi-stem shrub with oblong leathery leaves that are evergreen. Growing just to our east is Yaupon Holly which has tiny leaves and produces red berries for the birds.

There are two common Hill Country shrubs that are not, strictly speaking, evergreen, but are classified as having persistent leaves, meaning they survive into the winter, and in mild winters or in slightly more southern locations, may indeed be evergreen. They are the Texas Persimmon and Willow Baccharis.

Texas Persimmon is characterized by peeling bark, small, velvety leaves that curl under slightly and 1 inch round persimmons. The green fruit turns black when ripe. The fruits are a huge favorite with most all wildlife and many humans as well.

Poverty Weed or Willow Baccharis is a common, somewhat-invasive, multi-trunked shrub with airy fine foliage. It is commonly seen colonizing roadsides and disturbed areas of bare soil. Nothing eats it.

In addition to the above shrubs are the vines, Greenbrier has heart-shaped leathery leaves with prickles. Coral Honeysuckle blooms with red tubular flowers from February to November. Also, Prickly Pear and all other cacti, and the succulents, Buckley and Twist-leaf Yucca, and two species of Nolina, are all evergreen.

In contrast to all of the above greenery is the yellow or straw-colored King Ranch Bluestem seen along the roadsides and many pastures this time of year. KR bluestem is a non-native, introduced, invasive grass that usually produces many seeds throughout the growing season. But in years when we get good rains in the late summer and early fall, as we did this year, KR, which has most of its leaves lying close to the ground, puts up very many 1 to 2 foot stems with seed heads at the top of the stems.

The seed heads fall off and in late fall and early winter the stems take on straw color that gives the appearance of a healthy wheat field or an abundant grass-covered range, especially as it blows in the wind. Unfortunately, these stems contain almost no nutrition for animals.

Until next time...

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Caption: "A butterfly on Texas Mountain Laurel in early March."