

Plants with Prickles are Not All Bad

I know a lot of people who think that any plants that can poke you are bad and who set out to eliminate them from their property. Like everything else in Nature, it is more complicated than that.

Let me start with the most common one, prickly pear. The long “thorns” on a prickly pear are technically called spines because they are modified leaves (thorns are modified limbs or twigs), and the fine hair-like structures are called glochids. Some folks wage war on prickly pear while others seek out different varieties as landscape plants. Prickly pear do have some important functions in a native habitat, primarily as cover and protection for quail and small animals, as well as “nurse plants” to protect forbs and woody plants that would otherwise be eaten by deer and livestock.

Several years ago my wife and I heard loud screams coming from a large prickly pear in our front yard. If you have ever heard the screams of a rabbit in distress, you will always know it when you hear it. When we went to investigate, I found the back end of a large Texas Rat snake sticking out of the prickly pear. I grabbed it and pulled it out, fearing what I would find when I could see the head, but it didn't have anything in its mouth and hadn't swallowed anything either. I let the snake go about 100 yards or so away and later we saw a mother cottontail moving babies from the prickly pear—her hiding place had been discovered.

It is not uncommon to find plants such as young hackberries, escarpment black cherries, Carolina buckthorns, etc., growing up in the middle of a large prickly pear, which is protecting these otherwise deer-favorite trees from being eaten. The purple tunas produced by prickly pear are food for just about every native animal including deer, coyotes and most all of the smaller furry critters we have.

In the drought of the '50s, ranchers burned off the spines of prickly pear so their cattle, sheep and goats could eat the pads. Interestingly, I am told by most all range scientists that if cattle are eating prickly pear with the spines on, they are severely malnourished, and there isn't much nourishment in the pads anyway. But I have observed some cows that apparently have developed a taste for pear and are eating prickly pear pads with the spines on (It hurts just to watch that!), and they seem to actually relish them.

Agarita bushes are interesting in that they have neither thorns nor spines, but because of the extreme stiffness of the leaves and the very sharp points on the leaves, they are certainly well-armed. What good are agarita? Well, in the early spring their yellow flowers attract native bees and later the red berries feed birds, raccoons and other critters, including humans making jelly. And they provide the same kind of nurse-plant service that I described above for prickly pear. While walking people's property, I

frequently find clusters of several species of woody plants growing together, and agarita is almost always one of the species.

The greenbrier vine is another plant many landowners try to eliminate. It can have many spines on the leaves and thorns on the stems, although sometimes neither are all that prevalent. It turns out that the leaves contain up to about 20% protein, and deer will eat them, especially in the winter.

Yuccas and agaves have sharp-pointed leaves that provide protection from predators for quail and other small animals. Mesquite beans are an important food source for just about all herbivores and omnivores, and mockingbirds like to nest among their thorn-protected branches.

Dr. Dale Rollins, probably the state's best known expert on quail, tells a story about his speaking to a group of ranchers on a field day about how every plant has some beneficial function in the habitat, if we are just smart enough to understand it. He said an old rancher came up to him and held a grassbur up in his face and said, "Oh Yeah, what is this good for?" Dale said he was almost ready to give up when a friend of his spoke up and said, "They slow down quail dogs don't they?"

So, just because there are some plants you may not want growing in places around your house doesn't mean they are not important to the native habitat.

Until next time...

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