

Oh No! Poor Live Oak!

Dear Readers, The following column appeared in the Kerrville Daily Times a few weeks ago, but, because of a printing error the wrong headline was used which may have confused some readers. Therefore, it is being run again here.

For almost the past 19 years, the drive I take from my home to town begins as a winding road full of hills and turns. And at one point the road passes by a large native live oak that has always been striking because of both its size, its dark leaves, its near but not perfect symmetry, and because there are no other trees or structures so near to it that it stands out beautifully against the grass below. Its bottom leaves reached down to about the typical broweline height.

Others might describe it with different terms, but most would agree it was a beautiful sight to see every day on their way to town.

Then one day recently I noticed that it was only a fraction of its original self, having been massively pruned, or, I would say, butchered. I don't remember if I just thought it or if I actually uttered the words to myself, "Oh No! Poor Live Oak," but it was my sentiment. I still feel sad every time I drive by it now.

Now, let's get one thing clear. This is Texas. Landowners have the right to manage their property as they wish, and I would defend that right even in this case.

This is obviously not the first time I have observed what I believe to be unnecessary and even detrimental management of property in the Hill Country. Sometimes, the management is done by the owner in hopes of improving the profitability of the land, but often, as in this case, the landowner spent money to accomplish this action, presumably for only one reason. His/her sense of aesthetics. They must have thought it looks better this way.

It is certainly true that a large fraction of the population grew up thinking city parks, golf courses, and suburban lawns with short mown grass, trimmed up trees, and generally little if any understory, is natural and beautiful. And of course, many of the plants making up those areas are not native. There is no question that some people's view of the ideal landscape conforms to the above areas they grew up with and not with anything like a native Hill Country habitat.

It is also true that many people assume that as landowners, they should manage their land to look like these mental views of an ideal landscape, not only for their own and their neighbor's view of a well-managed landscape, but also perhaps for the health of the trees. I have often been asked some question such as, "When is the best time to prune my oak trees?" When I ask why they want to prune their trees, the usual answer is something like, "It's good for the health of the trees right?"

I have asked several foresters with the Texas Forest Service the following question: "Is there ever a biological reason to prune a mature native oak tree, that is, does the tree

ever really need to be pruned?" The answer I get is always, "No, not really." Pruning next to houses, cars, power lines, etc., obviously makes sense. For the health of the tree, seldom, if ever.

Beauty, of course, is in the eye of the beholder. To me, the most beautiful landscape is one that appears to be all native and natural, the way the landscape would appear if it had never been "managed" by man, the way we think it would have looked 200 years ago.

I recently had a friendly conversation with a couple over a cup of coffee in their kitchen. The husband had slowly become convinced that he wanted to try to manage his land so that the overgrazed, overbrowsed landscape would be converted into a better native habitat. The wife was trying very hard to convince herself that she would like it once she got used to it, but to her, she really liked the part of their land that had been pruned up and cleared. She wanted very much to like a more native habitat, but it just wasn't in her genes, or in her head, at least not yet.

Intellectually, the wife knew a native habitat was best, but emotionally, she liked the more trimmed and manicured look. And she no doubt, has lots of company.

I view my "job" these days, and that of a lot of Hill Country organizations and nature centers, as trying to help people's sense of aesthetics become more "nature friendly." I think we are making progress, but not fast enough to save the old live oak on my drive to town.

Until next time...

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the books "Hill Country Ecology," "Hill Country Landowner's Guide" and "A Beginner's Handbook for Rural Texas Landowners." He can be reached at jstmn@ktc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.