

Nature is Not Neat

We have a term, “human nature” that is usually used to describe certain characteristics or traits of humans. It also sort of implies that “human nature” and “Nature” are different. And although we are undeniably part of “Nature” and the “Natural World” or biosphere along with all other living things, we do have some traits that nothing else in ‘Nature’ does.

The trait that I am thinking of right now is that humans have a thing for neatness or orderliness that nothing else in Nature does.

When we plant things, we plant them in neat rows. Or, if not in rows, then by bunching all similar things together. Mother Nature never does that. Walk out in any natural area, rangeland, savanna or woodland where native plants are growing that were not planted by man. You won’t find any of the trees in a straight line. And you won’t find all the trees of one kind bunched together and all the trees of another kind bunched separately.

Look at the native grasses in any rangeland that has not been grazed down very short. All the grasses are not the same height—there are short grasses and medium grasses and tall grasses. And the different-sized grasses are not separated into bunches according to height, but into a random pattern, which is to say in no “pattern”.

Somehow, many people tend to think that this randomness is not “pretty” or “well-tended” or “organized” or “taken care of”. A lot of folks have a sense of aesthetics that is decidedly “anti-natural”. I wish I knew why, and could change it.

I have read that when English Noblemen used sheep to keep the grass grazed short in front of their mansions, it made “lesser-folk” try to imitate these large expanses of short grass by growing what we now call “lawns” in front of their houses and, these days, using a lawnmower to keep it short. We have to be at least as “neat” as our neighbors.

There are other ways we are so different from Mother Nature. Mother Nature doesn’t rake leaves, doesn’t mow grass (except when the grazing herds come through), doesn’t pick up twigs or branches, and doesn’t pick up rocks. In fact, Mother Nature doesn’t prune trees and doesn’t cut down dead trees. And she doesn’t use pesticides, herbicides, or fertilizer.

And in spite of the total lack of all of these gardening activities that modern humans practice with such enthusiasm, all of our native vegetation has survived to still be here after being here many thousands of years. In other words, our gardening efforts are not essential for the survival of native plants.

Of course, we humans do a lot of things that are not essential for our survival or that of any of the life around us. And of course, we all have the right to do what we want to on our property. If we don't like what Mother Nature provided us with on our property, we have the right to take matters into our own hands and change things to our liking.

The points I wish to make are two. First, most of the "gardening" we do is not necessary for the health of native plants. We can do things because we want to do them, or because we want to change things for whatever reason, but in most cases what we do is not necessary for the growth and health of the native plants.

Secondly, most of mankind's changes to the landscape do not actually improve the native habitat, but in fact are detrimental to that habitat. Removing native plants and substituting non-native ones, and making an area a monoculture of a single species instead of a mixture, makes for a less diverse, less healthy habitat, not useful for native animals, butterflies or bees.

As our population continues to increase, but the amount of land does not, more and more of our natural areas are being converted into non-natural areas with exotic plants and poor habitat for wildlife. Furthermore, most of these non-native landscapes use more water, chemicals and energy than native areas.

Of course we need some of these non-native landscapes to provide us with food and fiber, thus our farms which are necessary for our standard of living. But most typical suburban lots don't provide any food or fiber (home grown vegetable gardens being the exception) and is certainly not native habitat.

Food for thought.

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@kctc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.