

With So Many Native Plants to Choose From, Why Plant Anything Else?

With Native Plant Society of Texas chapters in Kerrville, Fredericksburg and Boerne, the Hill Country Master Naturalist chapter covering much of the Hill Country, Riverside Nature Center, and similar organizations strongly advocating that we all plant only native plants, it seems to some of us at least that the word is certainly out—Plant Natives instead of exotics!

So why do people still plant so many exotic trees, shrubs, wildflowers and grasses? It is certainly not because there aren't enough natives to choose from.

In her book "Trees, Shrubs and Vines of the Texas Hill Country," author Jan Wrede lists over 110 species of native woody plants.

There are over 600 species of native grasses in Texas, and over 200 species native to the Hill Country. Seventy eight of the most common of these species are described in the book, "Grasses of the Texas Hill Country," by Brian and Shirley Loflin.

The most comprehensive book on wildflowers of our area, "Wildflowers of the Texas Hill Country," by Marshall Enquist, shows photos of over 450 species of native wildflowers.

By the way, all of these three books on Hill Country flora are available at Riverside Nature Center.

The catalog of the Native American Seed Co. in Junction lists 56 species of wildflower seeds and 30 species of grass seeds, as well as many different kinds of seed mixtures for various locations, all of which are native to our area.

The recent Native Plant Sale put on by Riverside Nature Center and the Hill Country Master Naturalists had over 100 native plant species for sale.

With over 600 species of plants native to our part of the country, it would seem likely that there are perhaps several species of native plants that would suit anyone's ideas of what they want to plant on their property. And several of the plant nurseries in the area have significant numbers of native plants for sale, and some of those nurseries sell only native plants.

So, there must be some other reason(s) for people to buy non-native plants. One of those reasons, I believe, is that for a lot of people, they remember the gardens and the plants they grew up with, the plants their parents had around their houses, and they have a fondness for them based on their childhood memories. Back then, their parents probably didn't have any choice—virtually all the nurseries sold only non-native plants.

A lot of people chose a plant based on seeing something on their friends or neighbor's property and they want one just like it.

But there are good reasons why people should only plant native plants. As the human population grows and occupies larger and larger amounts of what used to be native habitat, more and more of our native vegetation (habitat) is destroyed or significantly

altered. Native habitat is, by definition, the home for all of our native insects, birds and animals.

When non-native plants are introduced into native vegetation, at the very least they compete with native plants for sunlight and water, thus reducing the numbers of the native plants. Furthermore, many non-native plants are not recognized by our native insects (pollinators, caterpillars, etc.) and therefore do not provide the same function in the habitat that native plants do. Then the birds that eat those caterpillars decline and the whole native food web is disrupted.

But worse, many non-native plants are extremely invasive and completely crowd out native vegetation (Chinese tallow, *Arundo donax*, ligustrum, Johnson grass) but without providing the functions of the native plants they displaced.

It is also true that many of our native plants also grow in areas to the west of the Hill Country, areas with less rainfall that we have here. Which means that these native plants can survive our droughts much better than many non-native plants acclimated to wetter climates (eg. St Augustine). The result is that these non-native plants need more artificial watering thus increasing the amount of our precious water used for irrigation.

Another way of thinking about it is this: all of our native plants evolved to be here in our climate and soil, along with all of our native insects, birds and animals, and, left alone, could continue to do so in the future. The least we can do is to try to interfere as little as possible with nature--instead, just enjoy it as it is.

Plant natives, not exotics, and Save Everything native.

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.