

How Much Brush is Too Much Brush?

Most all property owners in the Hill Country will, sooner or later, have a brush problem. But before I can talk about a brush problem, I have to define what a brush problem is, and before I can discuss that, I have to define what “brush” is.

My definition of brush is woody vegetation, especially shrubs and vines, but not including tall mature trees, that grows in a dense-enough manner that would make it difficult for a person to walk through it. Some might refine the above definition to include only “unwanted” woody vegetation with those characteristics, but I don’t make that distinction.

So, what species do folks consider “brush” that might create a problem? Depending on whom you talk to and which species they have more of than they would like to have, it could be ashe juniper (cedar), mesquite, willow baccharis, prickly pear, agarita, greenbrier, shin oak, Texas persimmon, huisache, bee-brush or acacia. And it is kind of like the way different people view Mexican hat—if they like it, it is a wildflower and if they don’t, it is a weed.

Let me make one point very clear. Everything in my list above is a native plant that has been here for eons, that has evolved with all of the native trees, grasses, forbs, insects and animals to be a part of the Hill Country habitat. Everything in the list has beneficial properties and can contribute to the diversity of the native habitat. There is nothing inherently bad or undesirable about any single plant of any of the above species and a healthy, sustainable, diverse native habitat would be expected to contain a number of the above species.

To emphasize the point, cedar is not bad. It is native, natural, xeric, evergreen and largely pest and disease-free. It provides food for birds, deer and some other animals, and in a thicket, it provides cover and shelter for many different species of wildlife. It is not the individual plant that is a problem, but rather too much of it, too dense a stand, or too great a percentage of the property covered with it, that can be a problem. And the same thing can be said of all of the other species in the above list.

Old Ben Franklin said, “Moderation in all things”. I don’t think he was thinking about habitats, but it does seem to apply.

What constitutes “too much” of any one species, or even of a collection of several species is something every landowner has to decide for himself or herself. Cattle and sheep ranchers will probably want less brush and more open grassland than someone managing their property for black-capped vireos or deer. In South Texas, owners with properties being managed to protect the endangered ocelot will probably tolerate much more brush than any owner in the Hill Country.

The reasons to manage brush might be for fire protection (cedar trees within 20 or 30 feet of a home can be a problem), improved rangeland (more grass, less brush for grazers), wildlife habitat (a diversity of species and habitat types), to capture more rainwater (more grass, less brush—although this is still a bit controversial), or a combination of the above.

I have to point out that everything I have said so far applies to native plants only. Exotic, non-native plants, even if not present in large numbers, can be a problem and may contribute nothing to the native habitat, so they should be controlled at the lowest level possible.

It is also important to emphasize, that if nothing is done to control the numbers of the more invasive species of native brush (especially cedar) they will continue to increase in numbers and size and crowd out other native species, thus degrading the habitat. Large areas of cedar brakes (thickets too dense to walk through easily) are very poor habitat for any native animals. Unfortunately, much of the Hill Country is in this condition because of few fires and no human control. If man doesn't control cedar, in the absence of a wildfire, nothing will.

Owning a piece of rural native habitat in the Hill Country is not something you buy and then just sit back and enjoy. You have to manage and maintain it.

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.