

## Other Less-Than-Favorite Native Plants

Last week I wrote about prickly pear cactus and how many folks strongly dislike having it, even though it is a native species that has some beneficial characteristics. There are, of course, several other native plants that fall into the category of being unloved by many people even though they also have some beneficial properties in the native habitat. Here are a few of these plants.

I can't count the number of times I have heard people call a hackberry tree a "trash tree" and say that their parents hated them. But experts say that hackberry trees are utilized by more species of wildlife than any other tree in Texas. Both the leaves and the berries are high in protein, so these trees are beneficial to have in any habitat.

Probably the most hated tree in our area is the cedar (or more properly, Ashe juniper). But individual juniper trees provide cover and shelter for all sorts of birds and small animals and the berries are eaten by all of our omnivorous mammals, many species of birds, as well as deer. The problem is not a few individual cedars scattered around, but rather the very high thickets of cedars covering large areas that crowd out other native trees, grasses and forbs to become a monoculture.

Some people living in the city don't like Texas persimmons because the fruits stain their sidewalks and driveways, but these fruits are loved by just about every small animal and many birds. Other people don't like shin oaks, which they call "scrub oaks" because they are small trees that frequently have crooked trunks and many root-sprouts.

There is a group of low-growing forbs in the nightshade family, such as silver-leaf nightshade, buffalo bur and bull nettle that are generally disliked, especially the latter two, because of the prickles on the leaves and stems. They are not grazed by livestock, but quail eat the seeds and turkey and deer eat the berries. They are frequently found growing in disturbed or bare soil and thus help to keep the soil from eroding. They are visited by many pollinators. In Europe, silver-leaf nightshade is a prized wildflower!

Then there is a whole list of forbs that are not generally eaten by either livestock or deer, and probably mainly for that reason, are disliked by ranchers. Many think these forbs are preventing more desired grasses from growing, but more often these forbs are there because overgrazing exposed bare ground which is where most forbs first germinate. Natural plant succession will usually have grasses take over from the forbs if grazing is not excessive.

Among the forbs not eaten by deer or livestock are Mexican hat, queen's delight, antelope horns, mealy blue sage, two-leaf senna, cowpen daisy, frostweed and snow-on-the-mountain.

Turkey and quail eat the seeds of Mexican hat and various pollinators visit the plant's blooms. Queen's delight is poisonous to sheep, but quail, dove and turkey eat the seeds and pollinators visit the flowers. Antelope horns are of vital importance to monarch butterflies which are under continued stress due to loss of habitat and extensive use of pesticides. In good years, mealy blue sage blooms resemble bluebonnets and they are visited by many pollinators. While cowpen daisy is not eaten by livestock, deer will eat the young leaves, quail, dove and songbirds eat the seeds and pollinators visit the blooms. Frostweed seeds are eaten by songbirds and the blooms are used by pollinators. Snow-on-the-mountain blooms are visited by pollinators and quail, dove and songbirds eat the seeds.

Finally, lots of people hate ball moss, some purely for aesthetic reasons and some because they think it is harming the trees. Ball moss does not obtain any water, minerals or anything else from the trees, except a place to grow. Note that it grows just fine on fence wire and telephone lines, it just prefers the environment of dead lower branches of trees. Only in extremely rare cases of less than 1 percent does the ball moss concentration interfere with the tree's leaves getting sunlight. On the other hand, some songbirds pick spiders off ball moss and others make nests from ball moss as well.

There is an old story of a biologist stating that everything in nature has some beneficial property, and being challenged by an old rancher as to what beneficial property sticker burs have. His answer was that they slow down bird dogs! Every native thing has a place in a native habitat.

Until next time...

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