

The Most Common Native Shrubs and Vines of the Hill Country

A few weeks ago, I wrote about the most common wildflowers in the Hill Country, based on my experience with how often I find those flowers on the properties I visit. Similarly, the following list represents how frequently I have observed these different shrubs and vines on various properties that I have visited in the Hill Country.

Agarita (*Berberis trifoliolata*) is one of the most common shrubs in the Hill Country. It is usually a multi-branched shrub to 6 feet in height and diameter. Its trifoliate leaves are blue-green or gray green, with each very stiff leaflet having, usually, three lobes that are very sharp and very strong. Its yellow blooms in early spring attract many different insects and the red berries feed many species of wildlife, and humans sometimes make jelly from them. Agarita are good to have because they are excellent nurse plants that protect the young leaves of other plant species from being browsed by deer, and they provide cover for quail and rabbits and nest sites for birds.

Texas persimmon (*Diospyros texana*) is a multi-stem shrub with small simple oval leaves that are slightly inrolled (edges turn down) and feel like velvet. The bark peels off revealing a smooth gray surface. Female trees produce one-inch diameter round fruits that turn black when mature. Most all wildlife enjoy these fruits which also make good jelly. Deer usually do not browse the leaves.

Greenbriar or Smilax (*Smilax bona-nox*) is a vine with simple shiny-leathery leaves that are usually heart-shaped or slightly lobed. The stems are armed with prickles which can be very dense on some plants and less so on others. The prickles can make walking through them very difficult and can ensnare small lambs. But the leaves can be very high in protein and new ones are readily eaten by deer as well as livestock. Greenbriar produces ¼ inch black berries which are eaten by many birds. This vine can climb trees, but frequently is found just growing along the ground or over other vegetation.

Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*) is another common vine, especially in shady places under trees where it may form a complete ground cover. It has palmately compound leaves (five leaflets attached to the end of a stem) which make it easy to identify as do the leaves when they turn red in the fall. It produces small light-blue berries. Virginia creeper is readily browsed by deer and livestock.

Evergreen sumac (*Rhus virens*) is a branching shrub with pinnately compound leaves with five to nine shiny oval leaflets. It keeps its leaves through the winter but replaces them in early spring. It blooms in clusters at the end of the branches and produces small reddish berries. While not a deer favorite, it will be browsed in by deer in some places.

Texas mountain laurel (*Sophora secundiflora*) is a common shrub frequently planted in gardens. It has pinnately compound leaves with 1-2 inch long leaflets that are wider at the tip. It blooms with a very showy purple cluster of flowers that smell like grape Kool-Aid in the spring. It is an evergreen legume. The red seeds are hard and round and encased in a pod—they are toxic to humans and animals. It is not usually browsed.

Possumhaw (*Ilex decidua*) is a branching shrub with simple 1-2 inch leaves with rounded-toothed edges. Female plants produce red berries that usually persist throughout the winter after the leaves have dropped. Deer and livestock will browse this shrub.

There are many species of grape vines in the Hill Country. One of the more common are mustang grape (*Vitis mustangensis*), which is very common in Gillespie County, is characterized by dull green inrolled leaves with white undersides. Another common species is mountain grape (*Vitis monticola*) which has the more familiar “grape leaf” type of leaves. All of the native grapes provide food for birds, but their fruits are too small and full of seeds for humans to be interested.

Some of the other common shrubs include American beautyberry, elbowbush, flameleaf sumac, rough-leaf dogwood, toothache tree, wafer ash (hop tree), Texas redbud and fragrant mimosa.

Too many properties are characterized by a few trees and a lot of grass with too little “understory” vegetation. Planting any or all of the above shrubs or vines on your property will enhance the wildlife habitat and help to ensure the continued propagation of these native plants.

For those readers around Kerrville, I am available at Riverside Nature Center, from 10 to 12 on Fridays to answer questions one-on-one or discuss nature issues.

Until next time...

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