

Native Hill Country Vines: A Nice Addition to the Landscape

I have written about our native Hill Country trees and shrubs in previous columns. Today I want to write about some other woody plants that are native to the Hill Country, vines. Somehow, when one mentions vines, a jungle comes to mind, not our semi-arid region. Maybe it is just too many Tarzan movies when we were kids. Anyway, we have lots of vines here as well, and here are some of them.

One of my books lists 60 species of grape (*Vitis* spp.) known in Texas. Not all grow in the Hill Country, but many do. The most distinctive species is Mustang grape (*Vitis mustangensis*), which is more common in our eastern counties. It is distinguished by having inrolled (curved downward) leaves that are somewhat duller green than other grapes on top but totally white from minute hairs on the bottom. Because the underside of the leaf sometimes shows, one can identify this grape driving down the road. They sometimes cover fencelines and small trees with their dense foliage.

The other local grape species have common names such as Spanish grape or mountain grape and have the characteristic wide grape leaf with jagged edges and no white hairs underneath. All native grapes produce fruit, but, except for the Mustang grape, the fruit is very small-- much smaller and in smaller bunches than you would buy in the grocery store, but the birds and small animals love them.

Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*), also in the grape family, is a very distinctive vine with palmately compound leaves (think of spreading the fingers of your hand, each finger representing one of the five leaflets, with all the leaflets attached at your palm). It produces small blue fruits and the leaves turn bright red in the fall. Considered a good understory plant.

Greenbrier, (*Smilax bona-nox*) is a common understory vine with triangular or heart-shaped leathery leaves. It usually has thorns or prickles, sometimes all over, including the leaves, but sometimes only a few along the stem. The leaves stay on well into the winter and are good high-protein deer food. Berries in clusters turn dark blue in the fall. Because of the thorns and the tangled way the vine grows, it is considered a nuisance by many people.

Southern dewberry, (*Rubus* sp.) is a low-growing vine with compound leaves with oval leaflets. It blooms white in the spring and makes black berries that are edible in early summer. This is a common shade-loving low vine that grows throughout the eastern US. The stems have short thorns.

I would judge the above vines to be the most often encountered around our area, but there are several more native Hill Country vines.

Poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*) doesn't seem to be nearly as common around here as it is in most of the U.S. north and east of here. It is often confused with box elder tree sprouts which also have "leaves of three", or with Virginia creeper which has five leaflets. When climbing a tree, it often puts out tiny "rootlets" from the stem that attach themselves to the bark. In spite of its toxic properties, deer eat it and birds like the berries it produces.

Coral honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*), is a great landscape plant that has red tubular blooms from very early spring into late fall and attracts hummingbirds. Other birds like the fruit as well. Please don't confuse this native honeysuckle with the exotic invasive Japanese honeysuckle.

Another good landscape plant is Cow-itch vine or Ivy treebine (*Cissus incise*). This vine has thick leathery leaves with two deep indentations that give some the impression of three leaves. This vine, which is also in the grape family, has unusual foliage texture and produces berries that the birds like.

Scarlet leatherflower (*Clematis texensis*) is endemic to the Hill Country, known to grow only in 7 counties, including Kerr. This somewhat delicate vine grows in dappled shade and produces small red bell-shaped flowers. Its cousin, Purple leatherflower (*Clematis pitcheri*) likes to grow in moist, shady areas.

Pearl milkweed vine (*Matelea reticulata*) is a thin-stemmed vine with heart-shaped leaves that produces a small greenish five-petal flower with what looks like a pearl in the center.

Carolina snailseed (*Cocculus carolinus*) looks very much like Greenbrier, but without the thorns. There are several Passionflower vines (*Passiflora* spp.) that produce spectacular ornate blooms. Finally, there are three Pipevine species that are host to the pipevine swallowtail butterfly larva.

Until next time...

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