

Tips for Growing Native Plants

Usually in these columns I try to avoid giving advice or information based only on my own experience. I always try to stick to information that is generally agreed upon by folks more expert than I, because as a scientist I know that one person's experience at any one place at any one time may not prove to be universally true. But today I am going to describe some things my wife and I have learned in 12-15 years of growing things in the Hill Country.

Just because a tree species is locally native and abundant does not mean it can grow anywhere on your property. Trying to grow a buttonbush or a sycamore on a dry sunny hillside is unlikely to be successful as they are generally found growing along creeks and streams. It is important to know not just that something is native to our area, but to know what kind of micro-habitat it grows in.

It is almost always more difficult to grow things in full sun than in at least partial shade. The former will certainly require a lot more water. We planted a possumhaw in full sun 15 years ago. It is still about the same size as when we planted it and it has struggled ever since. But it has produced berries, which the birds have distributed around the yard under various large trees. Many of the resulting "volunteer" possumhaws are now much bigger and healthier than the original. Most native plants will grow well in an eastern exposure or in dappled shade protected from the afternoon sun.

Learning to enjoy flowers and shrubs where they chose to grow, rather than insist that they grow in a certain spot is a lot easier, more successful, and more interesting. Trees shrubs, forbs and grasses, whose seeds have been scattered around somewhat at random by wind and animals often grow better than when we attempt to grow them in just the spot we want them. Mother Nature really may know best.

When we plant purple horsemint in a front bed and then two or three years later find it coming up in the backyard, we celebrate it and let it be. It may not be back next year, but it might come back somewhere else in subsequent years. Once you decide to let Mother Nature have a say in your garden plans, it may not make your yard a candidate for a photo in Better Homes and Gardens, but it is a lot less work and a lot more interesting and natural.

Since we love birds and lizards and frogs and even insects, we don't like to use pesticides anywhere outside. We have not found that to be a problem. We have never had a native plant killed or even severely damaged by insects. We also don't ever need to use fertilizers. Native plants evolved here without insecticides or fertilizer.

In case you are thinking we must have a pretty barren yard, it's not. It is almost full of blooms and birds and butterflies and hummingbirds nearly year-round. The biggest job we have is to keep some species from spreading and crowding out other species.

People with deer problems can still have vegetation that will not be eaten except in areas of extreme deer populations. Texas mountain laurel is not eaten by deer, and some other evergreen shrubs that may not be eaten include autumn sage, Mexican silktassel, cenizo, agarita, and yaupon. Wildflowers that are almost never eaten are mealy blue sage, prairie verbena, Mexican hat, cowpen daisy, four-nerve daisy, damianita and zexmenia. Grasses are not eaten and those which make good ornamentals are yellow indiagrass, switchgrass, little bluestem, Lindheimer muhly, canyon muhly and seep muhly. All of the above are easy to grow.

When buying plants, make sure they are true native species of this area and not a "hybrid" or "cultivar" which may not perform as well as the native. If the plant is in a small pot, you might have better luck repotting it into a larger pot (one gallon) and growing it in the dappled shade until it has grown the pot full of roots before planting in your garden. Plants in pots need frequent watering. For locally native grass and forb seeds, I suggest Native American Seed in Junction (www.seedsource.com).

Finally, consider allowing any root sprouts or "volunteer" woody species to grow and mature wherever they come up. It will probably grow better than something you plant.

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@kctc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.