

Common Hill Country Forbs Seldom Eaten by Deer or Anything Else

A forb is a non-grass-like herbaceous plant. It can be perennial, in which case it dies back to the ground or a small cluster of leaves in the winter and puts up new growth in the spring, or it can be an annual. It is thus not a woody plant (plants that put on new growth on old wood). Most folks refer to forbs as wildflowers or weeds, depending on whether they like them or not.

I wrote earlier about how deer have different preferences for different foods, generally preferring most trees and shrubs and avoiding most grasses. Some of their very favorite foods are forbs, but there are also a number of native forbs the deer almost never eat. And in fact these same forbs are almost never eaten by any of the exotics or livestock either. The result is that these forbs are more commonly seen than many of the more famous, and more often eaten, Texas wildflowers.

Some of the more common forbs that fit into the seldom-eaten category are the ones I want to discuss today. The seeds for many of these wildflowers can be obtained from Native American Seed in Junction, www.seedsource.com. Pictures of all of them can also be found on the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center website www.wildflower.org/plants.

Mealy blue sage is a 1 to 2 feet tall perennial with narrow leaves and a blue flower. It blooms in the spring and is sometimes confused with bluebonnets. Plants are sometimes available from nurseries, but I would avoid the hybrid cultivar 'Henry Duelberg'.

Prairie verbena is a low 2 foot diameter plant with reclining stems that turn up at the tips to show clusters of purple flowers. It is a perennial that blooms from March to October.

Mexican hat, also called Prairie coneflower, is a very common open bushy plant, usually from 1 to 3 feet tall with very narrow leaves. Flowers are at the end of branched stems and consist of a brown or tan cone-shaped center with brown and yellow ray flowers (petals) arranged around the bottom of the cone. Bloom period is spring to mid-summer.

Two leaved-senna is a 1 to 2 foot tall perennial with very unusual-shaped leaves (think of the shape of your fingers when you make a "V" sign). It produces showy 1 inch yellow flowers from April to October.

Frostweed is the tall (3-6 feet) large-leaved plant you see growing in the shade of trees. It has greenish-white blooms in August to November. It is a nectar plant for Monarch butterflies. In the early morning after the first hard freeze you can see ribbons of white ice-like material oozing from the bottom of the stems as the stems burst open.

Snow-on-the-mountain is the forb with light green leaves with white edges, usually about 2 to 3 feet tall branching near the top candelabra-style. It has small whitish flowers in clusters at the end of each branch. It has a white milky sap that should be avoided; if you get it on your hands, wash them immediately. Do not touch your face with your hand as the sap can be extremely painful to the eyes.

Cowpen daisy is an annual that reseeds itself quite well. It grows from 1-3 feet tall and has gray-green-appearing leaves and 2 inch yellow daisy-like flowers from April to November. And yes, it will grow untouched in a cow pen.

Silver-leaf nightshade is a perennial that grows from 1 to 2 feet tall with silvery-green leaves and violet to purple 1 inch petals with yellow centers. Each flower produces a ½ inch yellow berry. This flower is in the same genus as western horse-nettle and buffalo bur, but it has very few prickles.

Zexmenia is a bushy perennial between 1 and 2 feet in height and diameter. The leaves and stems are covered with stiff hairs, and each stem produces a yellow-orange flower at the tip, throughout the summer. A very hardy, drought-tolerant plant.

Queen's delight is a perennial that grows to a roundish shape a foot or so tall with very narrow linear leaves. It has rather inconspicuous greenish-yellow blooms in spring and summer.

There are many other seldom eaten forbs in the Hill Country, but these are probably the most common. Buffalo bur and various thistles are common in newly disturbed soil, but are usually replaced in time with grasses and other forbs.

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