

## Guide to Tree and Shrub Identification: Part I

Today I begin the first in a series of columns aimed at helping people identify the woody plants they find on their property and elsewhere in the Hill Country. This is a topic that can easily occupy whole volumes of academic books, but which I hope I can simplify in a way that will be useful to most people.

First, I want to explain why I think knowing the names of our native plants is important. I like to think of the name of a plant as the name you write on the tab of a file folder into which you put everything else you know about that plant, whether that file folder is in your metal file cabinet, on your computer, or, more likely, in your brain.

Knowing the names of our native plants helps you better understand the complexity of our native habitat, to appreciate the species diversity we have, and as you do that you will come to value Nature even more. It also helps in talking with others about plants. My experience in visiting peoples' properties is that there are usually many more species of plants than the owners ever suspected they had.

The problem in teaching plant identification is that it is much easier for people to distinguish plants visually than from a verbal or written description, and that obviously poses a problem due to the constraints of space in a newspaper column. For those who have access to the web, I am going to utilize my website which contains photos, drawings and discussions which cannot fit into a weekly column, but are available to everyone at anytime. For those who cannot or choose not to go online, I will do my best to describe plant characteristics as clearly as possible.

My website is [www.hillcountrynaturalist.org](http://www.hillcountrynaturalist.org), and in addition to the home page there are three additional pages one can access plus one about my book. The three pages include "KDT columns" which contains all my past columns, "HC Ecology" which contains various documents including the Tree Identification documents, and "Photos" which is a collection of leaf photos.

Note: From a tablet, each of these pages must be accessed directly by adding /columns.htm, or /ecology.htm or /photos.htm after the ".org"

In the ecology page is a list of documents that can be accessed, including PowerPoint presentations (you don't need PowerPoint to see them), that I will refer to in these columns in the future. These include "Tree ID Key", "Tree ID Key Photos", and "Names of Trees Shown in Tree Keys Photos".

The first thing that one needs to know in order to learn how to identify plants is what things to look for. Most of us do this already in identifying birds. When you see a bird, you may not think about it consciously, but you note its size, color, markings, and

maybe beak shape, because these characteristics are useful in identifying the bird. What you don't think about is that the bird has a beak, two eyes, two feet and feathers—because those characteristics don't distinguish one bird from another. The same thing is true in identifying trees.

What is important in tree identification, at least for non-professionals, is the characteristics of the leaves: their size, shape, type, margin, and arrangement. Next week I will discuss these characteristics that you need to learn and understand in order to know what to look for in distinguishing among different trees.

For those using the website, go to the "Ecology" page of my website and click on "Tree ID Key". This will bring up a PowerPoint presentation. On the left will be a black area with numbers down the left side. You can open any slide by clicking on the number. If you want a larger display, click on the "slide show" icon in the extreme bottom right of the screen. Once in this mode, clicking anywhere will advance the slide show, right clicking allows you to back up or to exit the slide show.

I apologize to those not using the website for taking so much space with the mechanics of how these tree ID columns and the website documents will work, but I want to be sure those who wish to use those documents can find them. I suggest that everyone cut out this column and keep it for future reference.

Until next time...

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