

## Guide to Tree and Shrub Identification: Part V

Last week I described a number of species that have simple leaves, alternately arranged with entire (smooth) margins. Today I will discuss species that have simple leaves, alternately arranged, but with toothed margins.

The tree that fits the above category with the smallest leaves is the cedar elm. Its leaves are usually 1 to 2 inches long, oblong or oval, very stiff and rough. It is sometimes described as being “double-toothed”. Cedar elms are common, strong trees which flower in late summer or fall, attracting many bees. It can turn yellow in the fall.

Willow baccharis or poverty weed has long (1 to 4 inches) linear, very narrow (1/4 inch or less wide) leaves which usually have a few teeth on the margins. The surface of the leaves has a sticky substance on them. This is usually a multi-trunk shrub 3 to 10 feet tall with an erect growth habit. It is often seen along roadsides and can be invasive on disturbed soil areas. In riparian areas it serves to hold the soil in place. It is dioecious meaning it has male and female flowers on separate plants-- female plants are conspicuous in October or November with clusters of white flowers. Baccharis is not a true willow, but is in the Aster family.

Escarpment black cherry is our most common native member of the *Prunus* genus of cherries, plums and other fruits. It can be a very large tree that can be found growing almost anywhere, but most commonly in or near riparian areas. Its 2 to 4 inch leaves are shiny on top, oval with a pointed tip and very small-toothed margins. Like most fruit trees, when young the bark is smooth, somewhat silvery with horizontal stripes, but when mature the bark becomes almost black.

The black willow is a true willow found growing almost exclusively along creeks and lakes. It has 3 to 6 inch long linear dark green leaves that are usually only about a 1/2 inch wide. The leaves are finely toothed.

Note: Some of the leaves in the photo have such small “teeth” that they may not show in the photo.

Slippery elm and American elm are closely related elm trees, neither of which are very common in our area. These elms both have 3 to 6 inch oblong leaves with pointed tips, both have “double-toothed” margins and a somewhat rough texture to the leaves. These trees are most often seen in deeper soils in lowland areas. The two species can be distinguished by small differences in their seeds, called “samaras” and by the color pattern of the interior of the bark. The numbers of these trees were greatly reduced by Dutch Elm disease in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Two other related tree species that fit the category of simple, alternate, toothed are the creek plum and the Mexican plum. Both are native to our area, but not very common. The creek plum is more common and is more likely to be found along creeks as multi-trunk shrubs which very often form thickets. The Mexican plum is more of a small tree and does not as readily form root sprouts or thickets. The latter is more likely to be found in the nursery trade. Both have leaves that are oblong with pointed tips. The creek plum may have slightly narrower leaves that are smooth and shiny on top whereas the Mexican plum's leaves are duller with a softer feel due to fine hairs on the surface. The latter's leaves may also be somewhat inrolled. Mexican plum fruits are usually larger than creek plum fruits.

Other simple, alternate, toothed species include Texas madrone, Carolina basswood, Anaqua and Cottonwood.

Just to remind everyone how we are going through the tree key, first we covered woody plants with a vine-like growth habit, then trees and shrubs with simple, alternate, entire leaves, then today those with simple, alternate, toothed leaves. Future columns will cover the category of trees that have simple, alternate, lobed leaves, which includes most all of the Hill Country oaks and then plants with compound leaves. In case you missed one of the earlier columns in this series or have forgotten the definition of some of the terms I am using, previous columns can be found at [www.hillcountrynaturalist.org](http://www.hillcountrynaturalist.org).

Next week I will give everyone a one-week break from tree identification and cover a different topic.

Until next time.

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the book "Hill Country Landowner's Guide". He can be reached at [jstmn@kctc.com](mailto:jstmn@kctc.com). Previous columns can be seen at [www.hillcountrynaturalist.org](http://www.hillcountrynaturalist.org).