

Some Native Hill Country Trees Other Than Oaks

Several weeks ago I wrote about the Hill Country oaks in this column. There are, however a number of common, large, native trees that are not oaks. Here are some of them.

Bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) is common along the banks of the Guadalupe and its tributaries as well as many other streams in the Hill Country. It is unusual for a conifer (cone-bearing) tree to be deciduous (loses its leaves in the winter) which is why it is called a bald cypress. These trees were highly prized for the durability of the wood for making shingles, which led to the settlement of Kerrville. They are fast growing, and generally the largest trees in the Hill Country.

Cedar elm (*Ulmus crassifolia*) is an elm with very small, stiff, rough leaves. It is common throughout the Hill Country where it appears to be equally at home on limestone soils or acidic soils. It flowers and sets seed in late summer, which is unusual, and, because not much is blooming then, it attracts many native bees when flowering. Its leaves turn yellow in the fall. Two other species of elms grow in the Hill Country, although they are not nearly as common as cedar elms. American elm (*Ulmus americana*) and Slippery elm (*Ulmus rubra*) are both large trees with large leaves and are usually found in riparian areas.

Escarpment black cherry (*Prunus serotina* var. *eximia*) is a Hill Country native cherry with thin, soft leaves that turn yellow in the fall. The tiny white flowers are produced on stalks in the spring, followed by tiny cherries for the birds. Young stems and branches have light grey bark, but large trees have almost black bark with grey patches.

The ranges of two species of hackberry overlap in our part of the Hill Country, sugar hackberry (*Celtis laevigata* var. *texana*), which predominately grows east of here, and netleaf hackberry (*Celtis laevigata* var. *reticulata*), which predominately grows west of here. Both have rough bark with bumps, frequently called "warts". The upper leaf surface of netleaf hackberries is usually rougher than for the sugarberry species. Both trees are excellent sources of food for many species of wildlife and are considered beneficial to have in the habitat.

Pecan (*Carya illinoensis*) is the native pecan of the Hill Country. It requires deeper soils than are found in most of this area which is why it is predominately found growing in the "pecan bottoms" of alluvial soils along creeks and rivers. Thomas Jefferson gave George Washington some pecans from the midwest (they were unknown on the east coast) and they are now the oldest trees in Mount Vernon! The thinner shell varieties that are grown commercially are all derived from the native pecans.

Sycamores (*Platanus occidentalis*) are the large trees with large leaves and white bark that are usually seen along river banks and creeks. They have large five-lobed leaves. They are fast growing and have the ability to take root and grow to maturity in a gravel bar in the middle of a creek, conditions where most trees would be swept away in a flood. Large trees such as cypress and sycamores are desirable along riparian areas where they help to stabilize stream banks and prevent erosion.

Walnut: There are three species of walnuts native to Texas, and all three can be found in the Hill Country. Black walnut (*Juglans nigra*) is the largest tree and also has the largest fruit with husks 1 ½ to 2 ½ inches in diameter. Little walnut or Texas walnut (*Juglans microcarpa*) is the smallest of the three and also has the smallest fruit (less than 1 inch in diameter). Arizona walnut (*Juglans major*) is intermediate in both tree size and husk size between the other two. Walnuts growing in deep soil along streams can grow quite large, although generally not as large as pecans, but walnuts can also grow in shallower soil away from any permanent water.

Mesquite (*Prosopis glandulosa*) is a tree everyone is familiar with. It is not nearly the invasive pest in much of the Hill Country that it is in other areas, because it really likes deeper soil than we have in most places.

Other, less common Hill Country trees are bigtooth maple, black willow, Eve's necklace, gum bumelia, rusty blackhaw, Texas ash and western soapberry.

Until next time...

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