

Learning the Names of Our Native Plants

The first thing most people ask about a particular flower or tree or grass is, “What is it? Or, “What is it called?” Even people who are not particularly interested in nature or in knowing much else about the plant want to know what it is.

It seems like a simple, reasonable question, just like someone asking you “What is your name?”

But with plants it is more complicated than that. First, plants have two kinds of names; what we call common names and scientific (or Latin) names. The latter consists of two parts, the genus name and the species name, and this system was developed by Carolus Linnaeus in Sweden in the mid-18th century. So the scientific name for our Spanish oak is *Quercus buckleyi*, where *Quercus* is the genus name for all oaks. (Genus names are always capitalized.) The species name is *buckleyi* (species names are never capitalized) which distinguishes this oak from all other oaks. (If possible, scientific names should be italicized.)

Common names are the names that historically are frequently used by people in the area for a particular plant and may or may not have any relationship to any feature or characteristic of the plant. Part of the problem is that there can be multiple common names for the same plant and/or the same name for different plants. For example, in the Hill Country we have a native tree we call a western soapberry, but in the panhandle they call that same tree a chinaberry. In the Hill Country, we, unfortunately, have non-native invasive trees that we, and most of the country, call a chinaberry. The two trees are not even in the same family. The soapberry is in the Sapindaceae family and the chinaberry is in the Meliaceae family.

Unfortunately, there may be more than one common name for many plants in a given area. In the Hill Country, Spanish oaks and Texas red oaks are two common names for the same tree. Also, unfortunately, sometimes the scientific name for a species can be changed as well.

So why do most of us non-professionals use common names most of the time? Because the Latin or Latinized scientific names are harder to learn and pronounce and most people are not familiar with them, and most of the folks we communicate with usually use common names.

Why do we need to know an accepted name for a plant? Because it is the only way we can look up anything about it in a book or talk about it to anyone else and know you are talking about the same species. Everyone in your household may know what you are talking about when you say “That weird plant growing by the funny rock in the backyard”, but no one else will.

How do you distinguish one species of plant from another? For beginners and most of us non-professionals, it is all in knowing what to look for. If you want to identify a bird, you pay attention to its size, its color or colors, the type of beak, the length of the tail, etc. With plants it is the same kind of thing, but it is different for different types of plants. For woody plants, you need to focus on the leaf type, shape, and arrangement. For flowers it the bloom color, size, pedal shape, season and also the leaves. And for greases it is the detailed arrangement of the seed head.

For most of us, the process starts with books. I recommend for everyone living in the Hill Country the following three: "Trees Shrubs and Vines of the Texas Hill Country" by Jan Wrede, "Wildflowers of the Texas Hill Country" by Marshall Enquist, and "Grasses of the Texas Hill Country", by Brian and Shirley Loflin. In addition to understanding the relationships among all the Hill Country species, I recommend my book, "Hill Country Landowners Guide.

Also, on the Ecology web page of my web site, www.hillcountrynaturalist.org, you can find photos for both woody plants and grasses of the Hill Country.

I can safely predict that you will learn things from these books that will not only make you more knowledgeable about the native vegetation around you, but will also make you appreciate and enjoy our native habitat even more.

Until next time...

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