

Some of the More Common Hill Country Shrubs

Previously, I have written about the more common Hill Country trees. Here I want to do the same about the more common Hill Country shrubs. Which raises the question, “What is the difference between a shrub and a tree?” The “country” answer is that “You can walk under a tree but you can’t walk under a shrub”, but there are a lot of exceptions to that rule. Generally, shrubs are multi-trunk woody plants with most of their growth between ground level and, maybe, 10-12 feet.

The following are the shrubs I think I see the most often in the Hill Country, but they represent only a small fraction of all the shrubs that can be found in our area.

Agarita, or agarito or algarita, is an interesting evergreen shrub that has no thorns, but is very “pointy.” The leaves are trifoliate (three leaflets attached to the end of a stem) but the leaflets are very stiff and have three to five very sharp points, which makes handling them difficult. They make yellow flowers in early spring and red berries in the summer. Agarita make good nurse plants because other plants can grow up inside their branches and not be eaten.

Evergreen sumac is a branching shrub with pinnately compound leaves with five to nine shiny oval leaflets. It keeps its leaves through the winter, but replaces them in early spring. It blooms in clusters at the end of the branches and produces small reddish berries. While not a deer favorite, it will be browsed in many places.

Texas mountain laurel is a common shrub frequently planted in gardens. It has pinnately compound leaves with 1 to 2-inch long leaflets that are wider at the tip. It blooms with a very showy purple cluster of flowers that smell like grape Kool-Aid in the spring. It is an evergreen legume. The red seeds are hard and round and encased in a pod—they are toxic to humans and animals. It is not usually browsed.

Other evergreen shrubs include cenizo (purple sage) and Mexican (or Lindheimer’s) silktassel, neither are deer favorites

Texas persimmon is a common shrub that can be almost evergreen in warmer winters. It is dioecious, meaning male and female parts grow on separate trees. The female trees make persimmons that are green, turning black in early fall, and they are favorites of most all wildlife, and some people make jelly out of them. The bark of Texas persimmon often flakes off leaving smooth, bare trunks.

Possumhaw is a branching shrub with simple 1-2 inch leaves with rounded-toothed edges. Female plants produce red berries that usually persist throughout the winter after the leaves have dropped. Deer and livestock will browse this shrub.

Elbow bush has small simple leaves arranged opposite along the branches. It is about the earliest shrub to bloom, sometimes blooming as early as the end of January, and for

that reason it is also called a spring herald. When it is blooming so early, it is usually covered by bees, flies, butterflies and other insects.

Texas redbud blooms in showy pink blooms in March and April, before the leaves come out. It is a legume and produces 2 to 4-inch seed pods. The Mexican redbud has somewhat smaller leaves that are not completely flat. It grows natively in the western part of the Hill Country and westward.

The toothache tree, also called tickle-tongue or lime-prickly ash is a shrub with small rose-like thorns on the stems. The leaves are shiny with toothed edges and sometimes small thorns as well. The leaves, when chewed, have a numbing effect in the mouth, hence the name.

Rough leaf dogwood is a thicket-forming shrub most often seen in damper, shady areas. It is not as showy as the flowering dogwood of the eastern U.S., but it does produce white blooms in clusters at the end of branches which later form white berries. Its leaves are oppositely arranged and can be somewhat irritating when handled.

This is just a small sampling for Hill Country shrubs. Shrubs as well as vines make up a very important component of a native habitat as they provide food for browsers as well as cover for all wildlife. Unfortunately, many properties are almost devoid of these components due to overbrowsing by white-tailed deer.

Until next time...

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