

Spring in the Hill Country: An Amazing Time and Place

It never ceases to amaze me at the speed with which our vegetation turns from bare and brown to green and leaf-covered, from open areas where you can see long distances to dense jungle. It is always such a joy to behold and the transformation never gets old.

While this transformation is most obvious and dramatic with trees, it is by no means limited to the trees. All of the shrubs, the perennials, the wildflowers and the grasses undergo a similar transformation.

And of course all of the new leaves tend to be lighter green than older leaves and they just look fresher and cleaner than the leaves we had in the fall.

There is somewhat of a relief in the spring when we see all of our favorite plants finally emerging and proving that they are alive and OK. In spite of the fact that it is unusual for a deciduous woody plant to be OK in the fall and be dead in the spring, we can never be sure until we see the green leaves again. And so now at the end of March, I can rest assured that everything in our yard is alive and well, although there are a few branches on shrubs and trees that appear to be dead.

I took a quick walk around the yard just to see what was blooming. The two most obvious things at the moment are the bluebonnets and the pink evening primrose, both of which tend to cover an area and to expand their area each year if we let them.

Other flowers I found include: damianita, fox-glove, yellow columbine, scarlet penstemon, prairie verbena, Texas star, tradescantia, and the first Engelmann daisy. All of the salvias are in bloom, much to the delight of the butterflies, as is the anacacho orchid.

In addition, we have, as expected the cool-season grasses such as the annual, introduced rescuegrass and the native Texas wintergrass, but also our switchgrass is already 2 feet all tall and the big bluestem is about a foot all as well.

Not every new plant is necessarily welcomed. I have noticed a few thistles I will have to take care of shortly. We have more vetch coming up here and there than I would like, but it is difficult to selectively get rid of it, and anyway, it is a legume and is good for the soil and will be dead by summer.

And of course, not all of the spring activity belongs to the vegetation. Our hummingbirds are back in numbers, some probably migrating, some are probably summer residents. The barn swallows are back investigating the light fixture under our porch that they have used for the past two years—they haven't begun to build a nest yet, but I think that is typical for this time of year.

One of the interesting things about watching the progression from bare limbs to full leaf coverage is that every tree is truly an individual. Not every live oak or every post oak or every cherry or hackberry, even in a small given area and even of similar size, starts to put out new leaves at the same time. In fact, different individuals can easily be one or two weeks behind other individuals in this whole process.

I have two young black jack oaks that came up about 8 feet apart in the same year and are very similar in size. But one loses its leaves about two weeks before the other every year and puts out new leaves almost two weeks before the other as well.

If you are as fascinated by all of the above as I am, you might be interested in becoming a Master Naturalist. To apply for this fall's class, go to txmn.org/hillcountry.

Until next time...

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