

Twenty Years in the Life of a Spanish Oak

We first bought the property on which the Spanish oak was growing a little over 20 years ago. At the time, we had difficulty identifying all of the species of trees that grew there, but we fell in love with that Spanish oak and a huge live oak about 100 feet away, and they have both been a part of our lives ever since.

The Spanish oak was what is best described as a “double-trunk tree”, with one large trunk coming off the base and leaning out to the south and another trunk coming from an adjacent part of the base and leaning out to the north. Both trunks were about 18-inches or so in diameter.

Sometime, I think in 2002, I noticed a small shoot coming up from the base between the two trunks. I had already noted that there were virtually no young trees or root sprouts of any of the trees to be seen anywhere. (The only exception being around a few shin oaks which showed several 6 -inch sprouts, but none much larger than that, and there was a lot of obvious browsing on most of the shin oak leaves.)

So to protect the little Spanish oak from the deer, and to hopefully provide a “replacement” Spanish oak tree, I decided to put up an exclosure fence around both trunks of the tree. The fence had to be about 12 feet in diameter to encompass both trunks.

A few years after that I noticed that not only was the Spanish oak sprout doing quite well, but it now had the company of at least one escarpment black cherry and a hackberry as well as a small cedar. The Spanish oak and the cherry were already poking through the fence and being browsed, so I decided to add another fence a little further out to protect their young leaves.

Then sometime, I think around 2010, the north half of the Spanish oak broke off near the base and fell, mashing down on the fence, but the limbs of the dead half still protected the plants growing inside the exclosure.

Today, I went out and examined the woody plants growing inside of the exclosure—it has now been 15 years since I first put up the fence. Here is what I found.

There are now at least 7 or 8 Spanish oak trees growing inside the original exclosure, all growing from the base of the original tree. The tallest of which is about 12-feet tall. In addition, I counted three hackberries that ranged from about 4- to 8-teet tall, and four or five escarpment black cherries, the tallest of which is at least 14-feet tall! There are also 2 or 3 cedar trees in the fence, one almost 10-feet tall.

As you might imagine, it is a real thicket inside the old fence now, so much so that it is hard to count everything and figure out which trunk goes with which top, etc.

Obviously, the new Spanish oak trees are really just a part of the original tree, growing from the original roots. Spanish oaks are not as fast-growing as the other trees in the enclosure, but they have the advantage of a much more mature root system.

The cherry, the hackberry and the cedar obviously had to have come from seeds, probably dropped by birds sitting in the original oak. The cedar is not surprising as there are cedars around everywhere. But the cherry and the hackberry had to have come from trees at least a few hundred yards away as there are none of those trees anywhere near the enclosure. Proving, once again, that Mother Nature is efficient at redistributing seeds.

Since nowhere else in the area is there anything like that density of young woody plants below the browse line, it is obvious that none of these plants, with the possible exception of the cedar, would have survived to grow to the size I just described were it not for my fence. The question is, if the deer population were more ideal, maybe one quarter or one tenth of the current level, would at least some of the new saplings have survived?

The answer, I think, is probably some, but probably not all. But it is clear that the understory habitat would be much healthier with fewer deer.

Until next time...

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