

## Some Light, Airy Small Native Trees for Your Landscape

Often when folks ask about ideas for shrubs or trees to plant in their landscape, they have in mind something with dense foliage to block the views or noise from their neighbors or the street or maybe even something on their own property. And there are quite a number of species for them to choose from.

But sometimes, what people want is something that doesn't completely block their view, and doesn't make deep shade, but will make an attractive addition to their landscape. And there are a number of species that fit that bill too. Here are some of them.

Desert willow (*Chilopsis linearis*) is a small tree that can be either a single trunk or more often multiple trunks. It has very long, narrow, simple leaves tapered at both ends. It prefers to grow in well-drained soil in either full or partial sun. Desert willow blooms after every significant rain from at least May to September. The blooms are beautiful pink to purple orchid-like over 1 inch in diameter. It is a legume and produces long (5 inches or more) pods that are very narrow. Desert willow is native to the western edge of the Hill Country and further west, so it is a very xeric, drought-tolerant tree.

Eve's necklace (*Sophora affinis*) is another legume with compound leaves composed of oval 1-inch leaflets. It is usually a single-trunk tree. The blooms appear in the spring and are composed of clusters of pink pea-shaped blossoms. The black seed pods are characterized by being constricted between each seed, giving the appearance of a pearl necklace. It is native to the Hill Country and points north.

Golden ball lead tree (*Leucaena retusa*) is native to the western part of the Hill Country and further west into Mexico and it can live in hot exposed places once established. It is usually a multi-trunk tree. The leaves are bipinnately compound with ½-inch leaflets. It blooms from April until fall, especially after a rain. The blooms are beautiful spherical bright yellow balls resampling a "sputnik." The seed pods are narrow, brown and about 6-inches long.

Prairie flame-leaf sumac (*Rhus lanceolata*) is a fast-growing small tree native to Mexico and the western half of Texas. It is thus fairly drought-tolerant. The leaves are compound with leaflets that are long and pointed at the tip and somewhat unsymmetrical. The distinguishing characteristic of these trees is that the rachis (the stem-like structure of a compound leaf that the leaflets are attached to) is slightly flattened near the tip. The blooms are clusters of small white flowers on the end of the branches. Bloom period is in the summer. The fruit are clusters of reddish berries which turn brown and usually last into the winter. The leaves turn red in the fall.

Retama (*Parkinsonia aculeate*) is yet another tree native to the western Edwards Plateau and points south and west which usually means being capable of surviving with less rainfall than we usually have. Furthermore, it can lose its leaves during times of severe drought and remain alive and regrow the leaves after the rains come. It leaves

are compound with many tiny leaflets along a very heavy rachis. The twigs are armed with several curved thorns. The five-petal flowers are bright yellow which occur after significant rains from April until September. The seed pods are fairly short with some constrictions between seeds.

All of the above trees can usually be found in native plant nurseries. In spite of the relatively drought-tolerant nature of these trees, they still need to be watered for the first year until they have become well-established. Also, while these are not generally considered ice-cream plants for deer, in order to be safe, I always assume any woody plants will likely be at least nibbled on at some time if not protected from the deer.

My personal experience has been that, of the above trees, only the flame-leaf sumac seems to produce new plants by root-sprouting. I have observed new golden ball lead trees come up in our yard that apparently came from seeds scattered by the birds.

Finally, there is one native tree that when young is also light and airy like the others above. The mesquite. Mesquite is not the invasive pest in much of the Hill Country that it is in other areas, and planting one is unlikely to lead to significant "volunteers" in your yard. On the other hand, I have never seen one for sale in a nursery.

Until next time...

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the books "Hill Country Landowner's Guide" and "A Beginner's Handbook for Rural Texas Landowners: How to Live in the Country Without Spoiling It." He can be reached at [jstmn@kctc.com](mailto:jstmn@kctc.com). Previous columns can be seen at [www.hillcountrynaturalist.org](http://www.hillcountrynaturalist.org).