

Prickly Weeds of the Hill Country

We are all familiar with shrubs and even trees that have thorns, like mesquite, acacias, huisache, bois d'arc, gum bumelia, toothache tree, fragrant mimosa, retama and Blanco crabapple, and even vines like greenbrier and dewberry. One might think that the thorns or spines deter browsing by deer, but in fact some of the above thorny trees and shrubs are deer favorites. And of course there are lots of different cacti that have spines. But there is another group of plants that are also armed with prickles enough to discourage even the deer, prickly forbs (broadleaved herbaceous plants that most folks would call weeds). Here are some of them.

Buffalo bur (*Solanum rostratum*) is a 1 to 2-foot tall annual with deeply incised (indented) green leaves and rounded lobes. The yellow five-sided one-inch flowers have a yellow center. It blooms from May to October. It has yellow prickles along the stem and the seeds are protected inside a ball with many 3/8th inch long prickles.

The Western horse-nettle (*Solanum dimidiatum*) is a 1 to 2-foot tall plant. It is characterized by 2 to 6-inch oval-shaped green, hairy leaves with a wavy margin and usually somewhat inrolled. It is a perennial that blooms from April to September with star-shaped five sided light purple blooms with a yellow center. It has prickles along the stem and on the main vein on the underside of the leaf. Its yellow fruit is 3/4 to 1 inch in diameter.

Silver-leaf nightshade (*Solanum elaeagnifolium*) is a 1 to 2-foot tall plant with 2 to 4-inch long narrow leaves covered with dense hairs making the leaf color appear gray-green in color. The leaf margins are usually smooth or only very slightly wavy. The flowers are 1 inch five-sided violet or light-blue with yellow centers which appear from April to September. This plant probably has the fewest prickles of any discussed here, but does have some along the stems. The fruit is a half-inch yellow berry.

All three of the above plants tend to grow in dry, rocky soils or to colonize disturbed bare soils. They are all members of the Nightshade family and are toxic to most animals, especially cattle.

Bull nettle (*Cnidoscolus texanus*) is a 1 to 2-foot tall perennial with large, 2 to 4-inch palmately shaped, 3 to 5 lobed leaves. All parts of this plant except for the flower are covered by transparent needle-like stinging hairs. The stinging may last for a half hour or more! The flowers, which appear from April to September are white with five petals. The seeds are in a roundish seed pod which also has stinging hairs.

White prickly poppy (*Argemone albiflora*) is a 3 to 4-foot tall erect plant with thistle-like leaves. It has stems that are densely covered with prickles and prickles on the leaves as well. The leaves are light blue-green with many pointed edges. Its 2-inch flowers

appear in the spring and are bright white with a small yellow center with a small red spot. The size and growth habit make it frequently mistaken for a thistle, but it is not.

Texas thistle (*Cirsium texanum*) is a three to four foot tall, single stem or multi-stem biennial. The leaves are 2 to 5-inches long, multi-lobed with sharp-toothed lobes, shiny on the topside and wooly on the underside. The pink globe-shaped flower head appears at the end of each stem from April to July.

One of the most invasive and difficult-to-eliminate exotic plants in the Hill Country is Malta Star thistle. Unlike most thistles which grow from a basal rosette of leaves and put up a (usually only one) tall flower stalk, this is a multi-branched, multi-seed head plant with numerous small yellow blooms. It can spread quickly.

Most of the plants discussed here are found under what is termed “primary plant succession” conditions, meaning areas where the soil has been disturbed by overgrazing, erosion or man. In the absence of the plants that formally occupied the site, these plants that are the first to occupy bare soils move in to colonize the area. As they say, “Nature abhors a vacuum”, so bare ground usually is initially covered by mixtures of forbs, followed later by grasses, then woody plants, in process called “plant succession” that may take decades. The plants discussed here tend to be among the earliest plants to occupy bare areas, especially in dry, poor soils. They hold the soil until grasses take over.

Until next time...

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