

Some Less-Common Trees and Shrubs of the Hill Country: Part I

I have written before about the more common Hill Country trees and shrubs. Here are some that are not rare, but certainly not very common either.

Carolina Basswood, or Linden tree (*Tilia caroliniana*) can be a rather large tree of rich, deep, moist soils. It is fairly common throughout the whole eastern half of the US, into east Texas. Surprisingly, it also occurs as an uncommon tree in the Hill Country. It has large round to heart-shaped leaves with an asymmetrical base, a pointed tip and toothed margins, and is sometimes confused with mulberries. Its blooms, however, are quite unique clusters hanging down from leaf-like bracts underneath small branches and maturing into ¼ inch fruits in the fall

Red Mulberry (*Morus rubra*) is another large tree with leaves somewhat similar in general appearance to the basswood discussed above, except usually at least some of the leaves will be lobed, most often a single lobe on one side giving the appearance of a mitten. It grows from central Texas to the Atlantic. Mulberries are most often seen along creek bottoms or other moist areas. The birds love the fruit, as do humans.

Blanco crabapple (*Malus ioensis* var. *texensis*) is endemic to the Hill Country meaning it grows natively nowhere else, and in this case only in Blanco, Kendall and Kerr counties! It is a generally a medium to large shrub with oval leaves with toothed margins. The twigs are armed with sharp thorns. It produces beautiful pink flowers which bloom as the leaves are coming out in the spring. Because of its limited range and the fact that deer love this plant, there is concern that this beautiful plant is declining in the wild. It is, however, easy to grow and it will root sprout to make more shrubs.

Rusty blackhaw (*Viburnum rufidulum*) is a small tree or shrub that is usually an understory plant. The leaves are glossy, simple, oval about 2 inches long, opposite with small teeth. The leaf petioles as well as the underside veins usually have rusty red hairs. The individual white flowers are tiny, but arranged in large clusters up to 3 inches across in March and April.

American smoke tree (*Cotinus obovatus*) is a shrub found in the Hill Country almost exclusively in Kendall, Kerr, Bandera and Uvalde counties. Some books consider it a rare plant. It has simple, alternate oval leaves that tend to be bunched at the end of twigs. It produces a few small flowers on the end of branches, but the feathery filaments that are part of the flowers persist for some time after the flowers and give the shrub the appearance of being encased in smoke.

Texas madrone or Naked Indian (*Arbutus xalapensis*) grows in the Chisos, Davis and Guadalupe mountains in the Trans-Pecos region and in our area as well. It is an evergreen shrub to 20 feet with 2 to 3 inch long simple oblong leaves. Its most striking

feature is the flaking bark that reveals smooth pink trunks and branches. It produces early spring white or pink ¼ inch bell-shaped flowers. It grows more commonly from Kerrville south and west than in other areas, and landowners frequently find small shrubs growing up inside the protection of junipers. It can be very difficult to grow and can be easily over-watered.

Goldenball leadtree (*Leucaena retusa*) is a small tree usually found growing in sunny, well-drained areas from here to the Trans-Pecos. It is a legume with twice-pinnately compound leaves with oblong ½ inch long leaflets. It produces bright yellow one-inch spherical flowers in the spring and sometimes after rains into the fall. It produces thin, brown seed pods about 5 to 8 inches long.

Mexican buckeye (*Ungnadia speciosa*) is a medium to large shrub or small tree usually found as an understory plant in canyons and along creeks. It has alternate pinnately compound leaves with 2 to 4 inch long pointed leaflets and rounded toothed margins. It produces showy bright pink flowers in March and April before new leaves come out. One of the more striking aspects of this shrub is that it produces a triangular shaped dark brown pod containing three glossy black seeds. The pods split open on the bottom to release the seeds. Interestingly, in spite of the name and the shape of the seed pod, it is not related to our yellow or red buckeyes.

In the process of writing this I realized there are too many trees and shrubs to be covered in one column, so another similar column will appear shortly.

Until next time...

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