

How to Learn to Identify Native Plants

I am sometimes asked, "How do you learn to identify plants?" I suspect that it is like learning anything else, there is certainly more than one way to do it. What worked for me might not work for you.

But before we talk about how to learn the names of plants, we might ask why learning the names of plants is important. The plant would be the same whether we gave it a name or not, but having a name gives us something to associate everything else we know about the plant. Think of it like the name of a folder, either on your computer or on the tab of the old manila folders you keep in a file cabinet. The name on the tab allows you to know where to put all the information you have about that plant.

You could of course make up your own name for plants, but then you couldn't talk to other people or find information in books about the plants under your made-up name.

Learning plant names has to start by learning how to distinguish the differences among different plants, and that requires you to learn what characteristics to look for. For laymen, the characteristics one uses are different for trees, grasses and forbs.

My friend Bill Lindemann, in discussing how to learn to identify birds, talks about looking for the important characteristics such as relative size, shape, bill, color, markings, etc., and identifying plants is the same process.

For trees, one looks at the type of leaf, the arrangement of leaves, the shape of the leaf, the type of margin (edge) of the leaf. For some trees, other clues are important, like bark, leaf size, texture, fruit, etc. For grasses, the most used characteristics are the size, shape, and arrangement of the seed head. For forbs, one most often looks at the color, size, shape, and arrangement of the blooms, but also with attention to the leaves. Most books for plant identification have sections that discuss these characteristics and the names used to describe them.

Unfortunately, most books which describe plant characteristics have the plants listed by family. If you are just beginning to learn plant names, and you don't know the name, you certainly won't know the family it is in, so finding your plant in a book can be tedious. It is kind of like the schoolboy complaining if he doesn't know how to spell a word, he can't look it up in the dictionary.

There are keys published in some books which allow you to go through a series of questions about the plant you are interested in (e.g. Are the leaves arranged on the stems alternately or oppositely? Do the leaves have smooth margins or toothed ones?). But keys to grasses and even forbs can be difficult to use.

On my web site, www.hillcountrynaturalist.org, on the HC Ecology page, there is a key to help you identify the 50 or so of the most common woody plants in the Hill Country, as well as a slide show with pictures for each of the key entries in order. There is also a slide show of the common native grasses. There are photos of many tree leaves on the Photos page.

For people just starting to learn our native plants, I would recommend the following books: "Trees, Shrubs, and Vines of the Texas Hill Country", by Jan Wrede, "Grasses of the Texas Hill Country", by Brian and Shirley Loflin, and "Wildflowers of the Texas Hill Country", by Marshall Enquist. The advantage of these three books over the many other good books on these topics is that each of these books lists only those plants that grow in the Hill Country, so you don't have to leaf through pages of pine trees or swamp flowers looking for your plant.

Learning to identify our native plants is not an easy task, but it can be a fun one, something you can do whenever and wherever you are. You start with what you already know (I'll bet you can identify a cedar, a live oak, a cypress, a mesquite, a bluebonnet, a Mexican hat, etc., so you don't really start from scratch. The more you learn, the more fun it is and the more you begin to appreciate our beautiful Hill Country. Good luck.

Just a reminder, I will be at Riverside Nature Center from 10 to 12 every Friday, so people can come with questions, concerns, etc. about our native environment.

Until next time...

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the books "Hill Country Ecology," "Hill Country Landowner's Guide" and "A Beginner's Handbook for Rural Texas Landowners." He can be reached at jstmn@krc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.