

Nature Abounds in the Hill Country

By Maria Salvatierra,
Bexar County Master Gardener



Red yucca and chenille prickly pear cactus provide a colorful presence at the front gate.

When my husband Henry and I moved from San Antonio to the Hill Country in 1995, we left a manicured home landscape for a three and one-half acre plot of wildscape on the Medina River in Bandera County, eight miles from the city of Bandera. Our little piece of heaven sits on the Edwards Plateau, a savanna with a bedrock of limestone

and averages 15-34 inches of rain per year. Over the years, we've experienced some pretty dry seasons; therefore, much of

what we added to the landscape does well during those hot periods. We were determined to keep as much of the native flora as we could, and limited our plantings of salvias, lantanas, rosemary, Gold Star esperanza, firebush and bird-of-paradise to narrow beds around the house, and pots of easy-to-care-for plants on our deck.



Bougainvillea can take the heat!

As big fans of the Texas landscape, we were delighted to discover so many native trees and plants on our property, especially the numerous Spanish and live oaks

growing here. On drives to and from Bandera and the surrounding area, we saw evidence of a past infestation of "oak wilt" that destroyed many of the Spanish and live oaks. Articles addressing "oak wilt" recommend careful pruning (always ensuring a seal on any pruned areas) and nutrition programs to strengthen the oaks against the disease as an alternative to more aggressive methods such as "trenching." We embraced that practice, and where we were able to find good pockets of soil, we augmented the native landscape with Lacey oaks, mountain laurels, Mexican plum, big tooth maples, Texas pistache, firebush, desert willow, fig, peach and olive trees, and a lone chaste tree. The property also hosts wild persimmon, Eve's necklace, Texas kidneywood, agarita, cedar elm, pink mimosa, various flowering yuccas and cacti, and grasses such as switchgrass, Lindheimer muhly, wheat grass and side-oats grama. There were, of course, ashejunipers competing with everything for the water source.



Clockwise from the top: hedgehog cactus, bunny ears cactus, and chenille prickly pear cactus.

Although ashe junipers, more commonly known as cedars, are not necessarily favored as a landscape tree, they offer shelter and food for wildlife and make excellent sound barriers. Therefore, we eliminated several but kept a few, partly because of what they offered to the wildlife, but also because we liked the form of some of the older ones and didn't have the heart to cut them down.

Cottonwoods, common buttonbush, false indigo, jimsonweed, and a few cypress trees can be found along our river frontage. In the mid-1800's, the numerous cypress trees along the region's creeks and river provided wood for the manufacture of shingles, the first business in Bandera. Evidence of that industry can be seen by the many cypress tree trunks left standing along miles of the river. Although many of the Cypress were cut on our portion of the river, there are a good number of the trees still standing.



Native jimsonweed grows along the river front.

The beauty of wildflowers such as wild verbena, Mexican hats, celestials, coreopsis, antelope horns milkweed, rain lilies, mealy blue sage, Texas vervain, zexmenia, Indian blanket, and Texas thistle (yes, even this is beautiful), to name a few, also abounds in the upper half of the property.



Lady Banks' rose grown on an arbor provides beauty and shade.

Although the climate here is challenging to most roses, an arbor on our side yard displays a hardy Lady Banks' rose that requires little maintenance, other than light watering and an annual pruning, together with a good dose of compost.

The slope beyond the back of the house leading to the river, supports many native grasses which we leave uncut to prevent soil erosion but mainly so we may enjoy their beauty. In that same area is a patch of wild onions. The aroma of these onions is strong, and the taste of these little

pearls and their bulblets is quite nice. I recently found a recipe for a *Wild Onion & Rosemary bread* that I am eager to bake, with what remains of this spring's harvest. There are also wild blackberries growing on the property, however Henry and I have not cultivated a taste for these and leave them as dessert for the local critters.



Harvested wild onions.

Our adventure moving from a manicured lawn to a wildscape was relatively easy. The lack of rainfall and the hot climate keeps us motivated to maintain our property with as many natives and heat and drought-tolerant plants as possible. We embrace an unconventional landscape that requires no precise edging of cultivated grass along non-existent sidewalks. Rocks (BIG ONES!) remain pretty much where nature placed them, and all the native grasses do not necessarily have to be mowed all at the same time. Out here, it is Hill Country living at its finest as nature takes its course.

All photos courtesy of Maria Salvatierra