



A CONSERVATION NOTEBOOK

by Homer Stevens



Jim Stanley, past president of the Hill Country Master Naturalist chapter, gave the conclusive address to the 2013 Master Naturalist program. The address was titled “Land Stewardship.”

The author of “Hill Country Landowner’s Guide,” published by Texas A&M Press, Stanley received the Native Plant Society of Texas Carroll Abbott Memorial Award, and for more than three years, he has written a weekly column, “Hill Country Naturalist,” for The Kerrville Daily Times.

Stanley’s passion for land stewardship and conservation is exceptionally sincere, and it is my hope that I can to some extent convey the same message. Following is an excerpt from his presentation.

“The land ethic.” We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may use it with love and respect. There is no other way for land to survive the impact of mechanized man. That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics.” — Aldo Leopold, “A Sand County Almanac.”

In the first edition of “A Conservation Notebook,” an attempt was made to point out how the forces of nature are interrelated and may manifest themselves in unsuspected ways.

It has been my good fortune to have stewardship over the piece of property on which The Farm Country Club, Farm Country RV Park, The Farm Cupboard Restaurant, and their extensions exist. Obviously, I am sharing this property closely with a relatively large number of folks from

regions some of which are vastly different from the Texas Hill Country. In many ways, I am proud of the way the folks living here on The Farm cooperate and help in caring for the property. In fact, it is their acceptance of my monthly newsletters that has inspired modification and extension of these letters to include a larger audience. All residents of our Hill Country share the same problems and limitations.

Many times, it has been stated that we live on the edge of a desert. However, it is very important to note that the area is not a desert. When you look out over the hills and valleys you see green. In good times, you may walk through knee high grass. There are no large expanses of bare land where a variety of cactus species constitute most of the vegetation. In fact, there is only one species of cactus that grows here naturally to any degree of abundance, and that is the one called prickly pear. Even prickly pear, as it grows larger, is subject to a white fungus.

We get an average of 32 inches of rainfall each year, when calculated over a long period of time, which is enough to grow many beautiful plant species. The problem being that there are more years below average than above, and sometimes even in the years that go down in history as being exceptionally wet, the rains come in large quantities over a short period of time. Our ideal scenario might be to get our 32 inches in 32/52 or .62-inch doses in a two- to three hour period every Sunday evening at 6 p.m. This isn’t going to happen, so we must continually prepare for the worst of times. These preparations will be discussed in later editions.

One of the better, most in vogue

techniques for establishing water and energy conservative landscapes is xeriscaping—the use of native plants.

I would like to point out some of the more attractive plants that I have had success with over a period of years. These plants are native to the area and have evolved by surviving our weather and soil extremes. To preserve integrity it is necessary to point out that all of the plants mentioned, even though native, do not flourish under all of the Hill Country's varied conditions. The plants mentioned here are all perennial, small shrubs. They were chosen to provide color with some hope that they would get tall enough that deer would not be a problem and the cages could eventually be taken down.

However, the threat of scraping by Axis bulls seems to never end. The shrubs in the planter beds on the way up to Farm Country RV Park that have survived well for over five years are cenizo, (purple sage), evergreen sumac, rusty black haw, viburnum, American smoke tree, possum haw holly, Anacacho orchid, red coral honeysuckle and mountain laurel. Included in these plantings are several varieties of crape myrtle and pyracantha, which are well-adapted introduced species.

Serving as a border that has almost become a retaining wall is native sacahuista, nolina Texana, bunch grass or bear grass.

Although six years is not really long enough to declare these plantings a resounding success, I am pleased thus far. The natural area where these plants are located is probably the worst that could be imagined. The bed soil is pure caliche clay. It would serve best as a sealer for leaky stock tanks. Therefore, the drainage is poor and the pH is high, and the available nutrient value is low. The planting area was prepared by scooping out as much of the clay as possible with the front loader of a farm tractor, building up with native rock both behind and in front of the area, and filling the area with a mixture of native

dark soil, Bandera Electric Coop Mulch and masonry finish sand. This probably amounted to an 8- to 10-inch fill. About six inches below the surface, commercial underground drip irrigation tubing was set in place. While this tubing was a big help in getting the plants started, it has not been turned on in two years and the plants are still surviving.

Keep in mind that mulch not only serves as a weed retardant, but it also helps hold moisture in the soil, and the process of decomposition results in a mild acidifying effect that is sorely needed in our hill country's many times extremely calcareous soils. You can observe the plantings that I am referring to by driving down Pue Road and turning in to Farm Country RV Park. We welcome visitors, and if you look me up I can explain some of the things that are going on in those plantings.



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