



# A CONSERVATION NOTEBOOK

by Homer Stevens

**B**ack before promoting Jim Stanley's book *Hill Country Ecology* and subsequently getting on rant regarding the general topic of over grazing abuses that seem to inadvertently occur due to uninformed new residents, the spring topic was to be Spanish Oak trees or Texas Red Oak. Kathy and I had made the drive from Medina to Utopia circling back through Tarpley to Bandera observing the fall color provided largely by the distinctly red fall leaves of the native Spanish Oaks. Although there are at least seven other species of Oak that are relatively common this area, Spanish Oak is probably second most abundant after the Evergreen Live Oak.

One of the better references, Wasowski's "Native Texas Plants", says that "Spanish Oak in its pure form is found west of Kerrville on the Edwards Plateau. North and east of there it is probably genetically mixed with Shumard Oak. Spanish Oak is more drought-tolerant, as well as smaller and shorter lived. It is also more likely to be multitrunked. Around Austin I've seen some beautiful specimens with attractive white patches on the trunks. The leaves are usually more slender than those of the Shumard, but not always."

It was the original intention to treat the Spanish Oak and Shumard Oak in separate articles, but since several of the outside sources insist on including them together, both will get coverage. It is also significant that several of the better nurseries offer Shumard in place of Spanish Oak, and some offer both varieties. It is difficult not to recommend the Spanish Oak to Hill Country residents because there are so many older trees scattered around the hills, and they contribute immensely to the special fall beauty of the area. However, they are very susceptible to oak wilt, will split and fall over for no good reason, and are

the lesser choice of all the oaks for a barbecue or fire wood. The Spanish Oak wood seems to decay rather rapidly after the tree is cut.

The Shumard Oak is credited with being a more East Texas species, but seems to adapt to the Hill Country reasonably well. Sources indicate that this variety is somewhat less susceptible to oak wilt disease, this being the reason that nurseries seem to favor the Shumard species. Here on The Farm there is only one Shumard Oak specimen, and is certainly one of the most beautiful trees on the property. Great care was taken in its planting something over 30 years ago. This was just prior to pouring the concrete slab between the game room and the swimming pool. Five 2' diameter x 2' deep holes were pounded in an almost solid limestone rock base with four holes being on each corner and one in the middle. The planting bed was then filled with commercial potting soil, and the small, less than 2' tall tree planted in the middle of a circle of limestone boulders. Currently this tree is very tall with an over 60' canopy. It provides shade for almost the entire slab where many weddings have taken place. This particular tree probably has good root depth due to the holes that were pounded out for the original planting preparation, but it is easy to see the evidence of the wide spreading shallow root characteristic of most our native Hill Country trees because of hairline cracks in the concrete slab.

Thus far these roots have not surfaced sufficiently to cause humps or buckling in the slab. There is evidence that the Shumard and Spanish Oaks do not readily cross pollinate because on the north end of the Shumard is a Spanish Oak that was dug up out in the pasture and transplanted. The Shumard produces few to no acorns, and the Spanish Oak has prolific acorn production.

Because of its value for shade in the summer and beautiful fall color, Spanish Oak and or Shumard Oak are wonderful additions to any landscape. However, there are few endeavors of any kind that aren't facilitated by using knowledge and thought processes. These oak species are very good

choices for planting on the west side of a home because they provide shade in the summer and shed their leaves in late winter to allow sunlight to come through. Planting closer than 50 feet from a building might not be a good idea because a three foot tree in 30 years or so will endanger the structure. Care should also be taken in locating water and sewer lines within 20 feet of the base of the tree because the large shallow roots will eventually not only crush these utilities, but can lift up concrete slabs.

Please feel free to visit the Farm grounds, see for yourselves, and make comparisons to determine landscape techniques that may suit your own purposes. We enjoy having folks visit and can show a lot of things that came out right and also some that didn't.



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