

Nature Out of Sync

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The summer of 2018 will go down in the weather books as dryer than normal and often hot. However, September through October of 2018 was a wetter than normal period across much of Texas. Here in north central Texas the area recorded 27 inches of rain. This rainfall did produce some grass growth for livestock but during October the days were getting shorter and the nights cooler, so grasses made preparation to go into winter dormancy. But not all plants march to the same drum beat, case in point being rough-leaf dogwood, *Cornus drummondii*. This dogwood is native across all of Texas but will be uncommon in the High and Rolling Plains regions.

During two events in October and November, I was part of native plants and pollinator training that was held at the Hagerman National Wildlife Refuge in Grayson County. This refuge is nationally known for the quality of white-tailed bucks grown just south of Lake Texoma. This year over 400 hunters applied for one of the 50 tags for the archery-only hunts. While I appreciate big whitetails, my interest was more in the diversity of native forbs, grasses and shrubs that grows in a quarter-acre planting of a native prairie. This prairie was installed to show visitors the beauty of native plants and show the benefits of native plants for landscaping and for pollinators. While there were many native wildflowers, vines and shrubs flowering for a multitude of bees and butterflies, an eight-foot tall shrub caught my attention. That shrub is rough-leaf dogwood and it was beginning to flower. The out of sync part is that this shrub normally begins flowering in May, not October. Perhaps you noticed some forbs that had modest flowers this past fall that normally are seen in the spring and summer.

A root-sprouting shrub or small spreading tree, rough-leaf dogwood sometimes grows in colonies and can reach 10 to 15 feet in height. Bark on older trunks is thin and gray with narrow vertical splits. Leaves are simple, opposite in growth, oblong with a pointed tip, margins entire but often seen with a wavy edge. The leaves will be seen up to 2½ inches in width and up to 5 inches in length. The leaves have curving veins prominently exposed on the underside. A unique characteristic of *Cornus* species is that if a leaf is carefully torn into two halves, tip of leaf in one hand and leaf base in the other, the primary veins appear as elastic threads remaining connected to both leaf sections. Flowers are tiny, white to cream-colored, with four petals and bloom thickly as spreading clusters from the terminal end of branches and from axillary branchlets. During spring rusty blackhaw bushes have similar white clusters of flowers making differentiation difficult, but under close examination of the flowers those of blackhaw have five petals while rough-leaf dogwood has four. The fruits are white in color being one of the few woody plants in Texas with white fruits.

Rough-leaf dogwood provides poor to fair browse value for cattle and good browse value for deer and goats. Crude protein values are highest in April at 16 to 17 percent, declining through the summer, 10 to 11 percent in June and 7 to 8 percent from August through October. Bobwhite quail, wild turkey, along with approximately 40 species of songbirds and small mammals consume the fruits from fall into early winter. Many species of pollinators are attracted to the small but numerous flowers.

This 'woody' is commonly seen along old fence lines, creek banks, on edges of woodlands and bottomlands, but it can also grow on hillsides. Excessive numbers of goats and deer, native or exotic, will form browse lines on rough-leaf dogwood. Control of animal numbers will prevent abuse of this plant. A normal frost last fall ended the growth of the flowers on this dogwood, let's hope it didn't use up all the energy needed to flower for real in a few months.

Photo captions:

1 Typical view of rough-leaf dogwood is that of a multi-stem shrub although it can grow into a tree given time and protection from excessive browsing.



2 The opposite leaves, pronounced veins and wavy margins are all characteristics of rough-leaf dogwood.



3 Several red admiral butterflies were observed nectaring on the new flowers of rough-leaf dogwood.



4 Four-petaled individual flowers appear in clusters providing abundant nectar and pollen.



5 By June 1st flowers have given way to green fruits.



6 Flower clusters give way to mature clusters of thin-skinned white drupes, each about ¼ inch in diameter containing one or two seeds.



7 Browsing evidence of white-tailed deer on a ranch that has been de-stocked of livestock for several years.

