

Rusty Blackhaw – An Uncommon Shrub  
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April brings a flush of flowers forming on many forbs and woody plants this time of year. Bouquets of tiny white flowers, each flower with five petals, form flat-topped clusters 2 to 6 inches in width on branch tips of rusty blackhaw. This irregular-shaped shrub is occasionally seen as a small tree sometimes reaching 30 feet in height though more often seen at half that height or less if growing in rocky soil. The bark is very different than most other trees in its range in Texas. The plate-like bark shows  $\frac{1}{4}$  to  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch thick gray to dark brown scales tinged with red. Young twigs are opposite, gray with reddish hairs, while older twigs are reddish-brown and usually smooth.

The leaves are where you can easily make positive identification of this shrub. Leaves are opposite or whorled on the stems, longer than wide in shape, may be pointed or blunt at the tip. The margins will show fine, sharp teeth with the leaves leathery and shiny dark green above while pale below with red hairs on the veins. These leaves will usually be 1 to 2 inches in width and 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  to 4 inches in length. The leaves of rusty blackhaw shine much the way the leaves of blackjack oak glisten in the sunlight.

Fruits are oblong drupes, a botanical term for a fleshy or pulpy fruit with a hard stone or pit. These drupes are  $\frac{3}{8}$  to  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch in length and form in drooping clusters which mimic the shape of the flower clusters. Over the course of the summer, the color of the fruits changes from green to pale yellow then to pink and matures to bluish-black with a whitish powdery covering. The single seed is oval, flattened and ridged on one end. You might see the seeds in raccoon scat and mistake them for the larger, flattened seeds of Texas persimmon. Rusty blackhaw seeds overlap with the maturity of Texas persimmon and the two plants certainly grow in similar soils and rock. The seeds of Rusty blackhaw begin maturing in August and last until October while Texas persimmon seeds within maturing fruits are seen from September through November.

Rusty blackhaw may be easily confused with rough-leaf dogwood during early spring when the white flower clusters become showy, but under close examination of the flowers those of rough-leaf have four petals while rusty blackhaw has five. A quick check of the leaves for teeth will reveal that you are seeing rusty blackhaw, since the margins of rough-leaf dogwood are entire.

Rusty blackhaw provides excellent browse value for deer and is also browsed by livestock. The fruits provide excellent mast for turkeys and are readily eaten by quail and many species of songbirds and small mammals. The showy flowers are visited by many pollinator species. Rusty blackhaw can be found from rich bottomlands to the top of thin rocky hills, making it adaptable from the Edwards Plateau north and east. To find blackhaw, look on the edges of woods, fencerows, right of ways, and brushy areas where it usually grows as an understory shrub. You might consider putting a wire cage around this shrub to protect it from browsing during its early year's growth. This is a nice addition to the landscape, uncommon but not rare and a treat to find when you see one.

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Photo Captions:

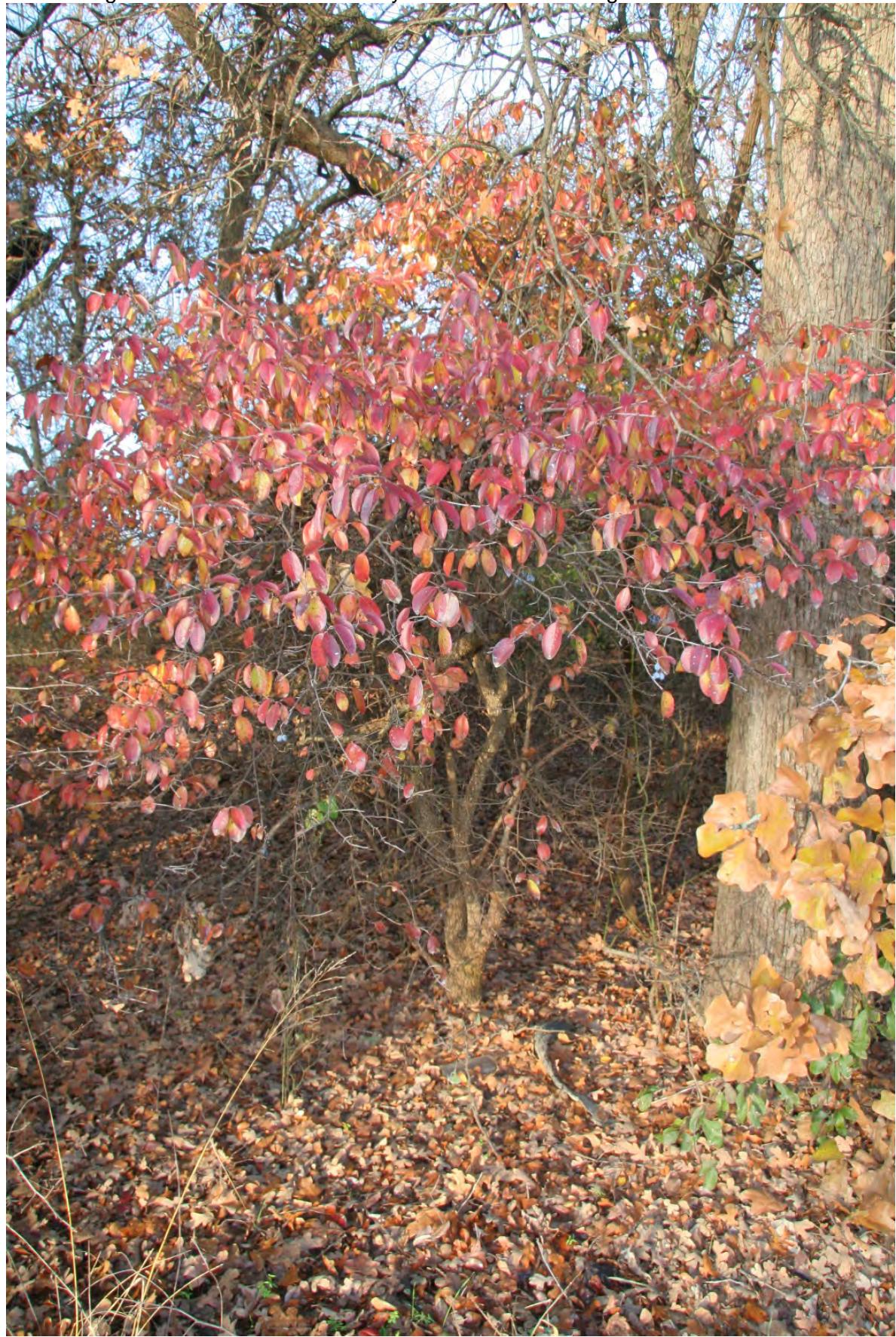
1 Close-up of the five-petaled flowers in clusters and the sharp, fine teeth of Rusty blackhaw.



2 Mid-April growth of plant shows the numerous flower clusters.



3 Maturing leaves in the fall turn a shiny reddish color. Note growth of this shrub in the understory.



4 Here you can see the color of the fruits turning from pink to the bluish-black of matured seeds.



5 Distinctive plate-like bark is found on Rusty blackhaw and is very different from other woody plants within its range of growth.



6 Spring photo of Rusty blackhaw showing the characteristic opposite growth of twigs and leaves.

