

## Some Common, but Inconspicuous, Small Native Plants

When I am out in the field with other Master Naturalists and someone finds something interesting, usually a plant of some kind, and they call to the rest of us to come look at it, we of course do just that. But often, when I go for a look I find we are looking at a bloom that is maybe less than the size of a pencil eraser and no more than 2- or 3-inches tall. At this point, I usually say something like, “don’t bother me with blooms less than the size of a quarter.”

It is said largely, but not completely, in jest. A lot of my friends can get just as excited over tiny flowers as over big ones. And I guess when it comes to grasses, I can get pretty excited over an unusual grass with very small seed heads.

But there are a number of very common, very small plants that are easily overlooked by most people. Here are some of them.

Straggler daisy (*Calyptocarpus vialis*) is a low growing (1-3 inches) perennial that has spreading stems that can actually make a ground cover. It has opposite, 1-inch triangular leaves with toothed margins. It produces tiny (1/4 inch) yellow flowers on top of the leaves, blooming from April until November when there is sufficient moisture. It is most often found in deep or partial shade. It is perfectly happy being mowed down to 2 inches, and may provide ground cover in areas where it is difficult to grow grass.

Frog-fruit (*Phyla incisa*) is a low growing (usually less than 4 inches) plant with prostrate stems that take root at the nodes and thus can spread to cover the ground also. The leaves are usually about 1-inch long with toothed margins near the tip. It has distinctive flowers that are a ring of tiny white flowers around a brown center which as blooming continues makes a cylindrical brown structure with flowers on top. It blooms from May to October.

Rabbit-tobacco (*Evax prolifera*) is very common, especially on drier calcareous soils. It is difficult to describe, but once identified, you will always recognize it. The plant itself is very small, usually less than 3 inches tall with gray-green tiny leaves (think the color of cenizo) with fuzzy-looking white flowers on the top of the stems. Both the leaves and the flowers are compressed so closely together to make it difficult to differentiate.

Dwarf white aster (*Chaetopappa bellidifolia*) is one of those annual plants that you may not see this year or the next, but then you may see it everywhere in other years. It is the kind of thing many books refer to as “abundant where found.” It usually only grows to less than 6 inches tall with small, spatulate leaves and very tiny (usually less than ¼ inch in diameter) pale blue or lavender flowers at the end of the stems. It is most easily recognized because each plant tends to produce multiple blooms all at once.

Another small plant comes to mind that is neither a forb or a grass, but a sedge, cedar sedge. It is a low-growing, grass-like plant known to grow mainly in the shade of trees

or, as the name implies, under cedar. It appears to be evergreen, and is not usually grazed by deer or livestock.

Of course there are a number of grasses that never get more than a few inches tall either and can easily be overlooked by the casual observer. These include Texas grama, red grama, hairy tridens, buffalograss and curly mesquite. The latter two are actually turf grasses that spread by stolons to cover the ground and are used as native, xeric grasses for lawns.

All of the native plants mentioned here provide valuable components to any native habitat. Anything that covers the ground is better than bare ground, and there are many insects as well as lizards, skinks and very small ground snakes that occupy the area these plants grow in. And they certainly help to slow down rainfall flowing across the surface as well as shade the soil and prevent evaporation from the soil.

In Mother Nature, everything has its place and there is a place for everything!

Until next time...

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the books "Hill Country Landowner's Guide" and "A Beginner's Handbook for Rural Texas Landowners: How to Live in the Country Without Spoiling It." He can be reached at [jstmn@kctc.com](mailto:jstmn@kctc.com). Previous columns can be seen at [www.hillcountrynaturalist.org](http://www.hillcountrynaturalist.org).