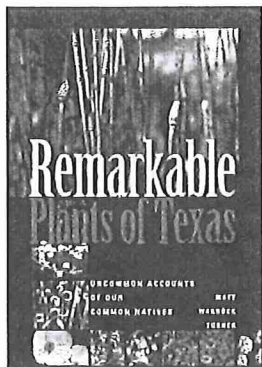


Uncommon Knowledge

Remarkable Plants of Texas: Uncommon Accounts of Our Common Natives by Matt Warnock Turner. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009. 320 pp. \$29.95 cloth)

Matt Warnock Turner's *Remarkable Plants of Texas* is remarkably informative. Turner hardly bothers to identify these plants because he writes about common native plants, but he provides his readers an extraordinary amount of information about what he calls their "story." He details what archaeologists have learned about how the earliest cultures used these plants. He reveals how more recently Native Americans have used them. And he traces their uses to the present. He provides copious information about their medicinal uses, particularly by Hispanic herbal healers. He warns in a medical disclaimer that he is not providing medical advice and that he accepts no responsibility for the use or misuse of the information in his book. With plant after plant, we learn about how they have been used



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Turner has detailed entries on many of the flowers and weeds I have growing on my land—amaranth, purple coneflower, coreopsis, wild onion, Indian blanket, sunflower, and bluebonnets. Much of the information was new to me.

Several others of my trees and shrubs have highly informative entries—hackberry, mountain laurel, Ashe juniper, Texas buckeye, mesquite, Texas persimmon, agarito, prickly pear, and yaupon. I liked the discussion about the names of some of these, particularly about whether the name *cedar* should be used in referring to juniper. Turner says you can call them anything you wish—after all, they are not scientific names. And cedar is the word in "common parlance." As thorough as this Texas author is in providing all of the possible uses for these plants, then and now, somehow he failed to mention that mesquite is used to smoke the malt for Shiner's Smokehaus Beer.

I was disappointed in there not being an entry for my favorite tree, the cedar elm. But four others of my favorites were well represented—bald cypress, long leaf pine, Osage orange, and cottonwood. Pictures accompany every entry, but most are not especially noteworthy. However, one that

for treatments of many illnesses and about how poisonous many of the plants are.

Turner divides his explanations into three groups: (1) trees, (2) shrubs, and (3) herbaceous plants, cacti, grasses, vines, and aquatics. I read it in a different order. I read about the plants on my own land first. I knew already that live oak was an extremely heavy and hard wood, but I had no knowledge of how important it had been in building wooden ships. I learned that the *U.S.S. Constitution* was called *Old Ironsides* because of the hardness of the live oak from which it was built. My live oaks have ball moss and Spanish moss, and I knew that these bromeliads are not parasites. But I learned that they can absorb most of the atmospheric nutrients before these can be absorbed by the tree's roots and indirectly parasitize the trees. I learned these plants have uses as varied as mattress stuffing and biofilters. I thought mistletoe was a parasite. But Turner says because it carries on photosynthesis it is not—it's a hemiparasite. And I knew about how the Texas wild grape climbing my oaks saved the French wine business, and Turner details how it happened, particularly the role of Thomas Volney Munson, a Texan who in 1889 was awarded the French Legion of Honor for his aid in saving the French wine industry.

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is included features the cottonwoods that sprouted from the corral posts at Fort Davis.

Because I am planning a trip to Big Bend, highly useful to me have been the entries about the plants of Southwest Texas—creosote bush, lechuguilla, sotol, candelilla, ocotillo, and tasajillo. The 11-thousand-year-old age of a creosote bush clone is remarkable as are the many insects that feed only on it. Equally remarkable are the many uses to which these plants have been put. Sotol has been an important food for man. Ocotillo provides fencing; candelilla provides wax. There was a whole wax industry from it at one time, and it is still used in some important products.

One kind of information notably missing is about diseases and predators that attack these plants. And I don't mind. That information is available in many other books. The rest of the information provided here isn't.

This remarkably informative book can be read in many ways. I recommend putting it on a bedside table and reading a few entries each night. And readers can leaf through it and read about favorite plants first, as I did.

Dick Heaberlin is coeditor of TBR.