Abilene Reporter News

Bruce Kreitler: Trees stretching out for spring

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I don’t know how many people will be interested in this, but right now is a good time to actually be able to catch a tree growing.

Trees are pretty sneaky (for you "Lord of the Rings" fans, that's the same as sneaksy). They never seem to grow when you plant them, and want them to hurry up and get big, but then one day, you suddenly notice that the tree has gotten a lot bigger, and you start wondering exactly when that happened.

Other plants in the landscape, who struggle to get light as a nearby tree extends its canopy, notice the growth a lot quicker than we usually do.

Anyway, a lot of trees are putting on some pretty impressive spring growth right now, and if you take a little time to look at branches closely, you can see the new, tender, growth. Generally, new growth is visibly different from last year's growth.

For instance, on a pecan, and most red oaks, the new stem extensions will be some shade of green, where last year's growth, will usually be some shade of brown, or possibly grey. That new growth will usually be pretty supple, if you try to bend it or manipulate it in some way.

Just as a side note, some tree's new growth will be brittle, cough, post oaks, magnolias, cough, and I don't recommend doing a "suppleness test" on such trees, ever. In those cases, you probably wukk break off whatever you were trying to bend, be it new growth, old growth, or dead wood. Sometimes, it pays to know the differences between tree species.

Trees grow in a couple of different ways. The new growth that I referred to above, is shoot extension, or as we arborists like to think of it, "apical" growth. Nothing complicated here, it's simply the shoots and branches extending in length, and it's something that is detectable year-round, but particularly visible right now.

The other way trees grow is to increase the diameter of trunks and branches that already exist. The arborilogical term for this is meristematic growth. Meristematic growth is not something that is easily seen by the naked eye, and to keep track of that, someone would have to measure, from year to year, the diameter of the tree parts in question.

As it happens, I do a lot of diameter measuring on trees, and some of those trees, for various reasons, I measure annually, and keep track of their diameter. How much, or how little, a tree trunk increases in size from year to year can be pretty interesting.

Figure 1Bruce Kreitler (Photo: .)

Of course, young trees tend to grow much more vigorously than their more mature cousins. As I mentioned, those are generally the ones that we usually think of as taking forever to get big. I've seen plenty of younger trees this year that have already put on a foot of new growth.

Twelve inches may not seem like much, but if branches are increasing a foot in length, that means the overall canopy will have increased by two feet in diameter. Again, that just doesn't seem like a lot, but if it were to do that every year, for 10 years, that would be a 20-foot increase in diameter, and at least another 10 feet in height (in young trees, they tend to grow taller, a little faster, than they grow wide).

Right now, trees are doing what they like to do in the spring, which is grow, and for a while, that growth will be really obvious.

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