

Lacey oak, a NICE! little tree for Hill Country yards

Bill Ward Boerne Chapter, Native Plant Society of Texas

A happy surprise for me several years ago when I began paying more attention to the trees of the Hill Country was “discovering” the Lacey oak (*Quercus laceyi*). I especially was struck by the gray-green foliage, which in some lights has a bluish cast. In fact, many people refer to this tree as “blue oak.”

Blue is my favorite color for anything; so Lacey oak is one of my favorite native trees. I was glad the committee for Operation NICE! (Natives Instead of the Common Exotics!) chose to start the new year with Lacey oak as Plant of the Month for January. My only fear is that the local nurseries may not be able to get an adequate supply from their wholesalers. Lacey oak is available from wholesale nurseries only intermittently.

The Lacey oak grows fairly slowly into a small-to-medium-size tree. Maximum height is about 45 feet. It is drought-resistant and immune to oak wilt. Lacey oak prefers good drainage and calcareous soils. The Boerne Chapter of the Native Plant Society of Texas provides free planting and care instructions for Lacey oak at nurseries participating in Operation NICE! (Hill Country African Violets and Nursery, Barkley’s Nursery Center, and Maldonado Landscape and Nursery).

Where I’ve noticed this tree in the Boerne area is mostly on the highest hilltops capped by Edwards limestone. I wonder whether it grows on Edwards limestone because it likes the well-drained higher elevations or whether it favors the more-pure limestone of the Edwards, as opposed to the clayey limestones of the Glen Rose Formation at lower elevations. The little Lacey oak planted in our Glen Rose yard seems to be doing just fine.

In Texas, the Lacey oak is restricted to the Edwards Plateau and just west of the Pecos River. It also grows in the mountains of northeastern Mexico, south to Oaxaca.

Lacey oak is named for the Hill Country rancher and naturalist who first introduced this tree to the botanical community. According to the “Handbook of Texas Online,” Howard George Lacey maintained a ranch on Turtle Creek seven miles southwest of Kerrville from 1882 to 1919.

This is an area where steep hills are capped by Edwards limestone; therefore I can guess that Mr. Lacey discovered his namesake tree on a limestone hill high above Turtle Creek.

Howard Lacey was born into an aristocratic family in Dorset County, England. At the age of 26,

after graduating from Cambridge University, he immigrated to the US and settled in Kerr County, Texas. Besides gaining recognition as a breeder of Angora goats, he was acclaimed as a naturalist. He made collections of fauna and flora of the region and corresponded with scientists in Europe and throughout the US.

His work with the Smithsonian Institute, British Museum of Natural History, American Ornithological Union, Audubon Society, and National Geographic Society earned his reputation as an authority on natural history of the Texas Hill Country. In recognition for his contributions to zoology, three small mammals (the brush mouse, the white-ankled mouse, and a harvest mouse) were named in his honor.

Howard Lacey fell into ill health in his early sixties. He sold his ranch in 1919, donated his collection of specimens to the Witte Museum, and moved back to England. He died there in 1929. There is no record that Lacey ever married or had children. That may account for how he had time to ranch and also do extensive collecting and documentation of Hill Country species.