

Riparian Notes

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The Value of Riparian Baccharis

Most folks involved in farming, ranching and natural resource management have a rather low opinion of Baccharis. This native shrub often grows in damp or seepy situations and sometimes it encroaches into old cropland fields, pastureland or rangeland where it is not welcomed. It is considered a poor browse plant and it can become thick enough to limit the intended use of pastures. In upland settings, control of Baccharis is sometimes needed and recommended.

However, Baccharis is a valuable native shrub for riparian protection and can play an important role in the restoration of degraded riparian areas. In this setting it serves as a pioneer woody plant that helps stabilize banks, floodplains and gravel bars. Granted, Baccharis does behave somewhat like a “weedy” plant, but this characteristic is desirable when it comes to stabilization of poorly vegetated riparian areas. Seed production is prolific and the fluffy seed is easily dispersed by wind. Seedlings establish readily under the right conditions, and growth is fairly rapid.

Most species of Baccharis are multi-stemmed shrubs. A good stand of Baccharis is very effective at slowing water velocity, thus decreasing the erosive power of flood flows. As water velocity is slowed, more sediment will drop, helping to build floodplains, banks, point bars and meandering. Because Baccharis is a non-preferred browse plant, it can establish and grow well even with high deer and livestock numbers. As sediment and organic debris is trapped by a matrix of Baccharis stems, other desirable riparian plants can more easily become established. Furthermore, Baccharis helps provide physical protection from grazing and browsing to such newly developing vegetation.

Like other pioneer plant species, Baccharis is not long lived and is often replaced by other more persistent vegetation as riparian plant communities mature. An example of this is found in an account of a Pedernales River riparian site in Gillespie County. A rancher was describing his recollection of the riverside vegetation to NRCS Wildlife Biologist Jerry Turrentine. The rancher recounted that a certain segment of river bottom was nothing but thick, nasty stand of Baccharis growing on a raw gravel bar when he was a boy. No trees were present. Now, many years later, the exact same area is a very nicely wooded and well vegetated riparian area. A canopy of mature pecan, red mulberry, Western soapberry, American elm, cedar elm, hackberry and sycamore is present with a shrub understory of rough-leaf dogwood, indigobush amorphia, and buttonbush. A dense herbaceous cover consists of wildrye, Eastern gamagrass, switchgrass, bushy bluestem and sedges.

This points out the need to be patient with the natural development of riparian vegetation. The first series of plants to establish will usually not be the ultimate plant community. Plant succession must be allowed to proceed and progress at its own pace. Some initial plant communities may seem weak and weedy and inadequate, but with time and proper management, they will develop more and more diversity and will evolve into stable mature riparian plant communities. Bravo to Baccharis!