

WHAT'S HAPPENIN' ON THE HILL

NATURAL HISTORY OF HAYS COUNTY

Beacon Hill, Texas

January 2022

EVERGREEN...OR NOT

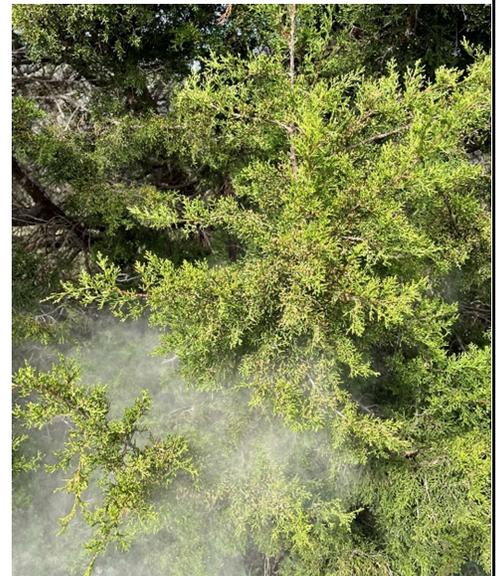
An abrupt hard freeze in early January brought a quick end to the green season for many plants found on the hill. Throughout the warm month of December, we watched with amazement as one species after another continued growing and blooming far into winter. But the curtain has come down on blooming paintbrush, lantana, horse herb and the like. Now is the time for evergreens like these two to shine.

PLATEAU LIVE OAK, *Quercus fusiformis*, is a large nearly evergreen tree found across much of the Edwards Plateau, northward into SW Oklahoma and down into the northern states of Mexico. This durable, long-lived tree grows well on dry rocky terrain and attains enormous size after many centuries of growth. Its acorns mature in one year and are valuable to wildlife like turkey and deer. This fruit was also part of the American Indian diet, and after bitter tannins are boiled away can be made into a flour. The wood is heavy and hard and resistant to decay, making it useful for lumber as well as a fuel source. This live oak is closely related to the Coastal Live Oak, but is more drought and cold tolerant allowing it to range farther north and west. Both are resistant to most insect and disease problems; however, they have an Achilles heel with regards to Oak Wilt, a deadly tree disease. To dodge this lethal pathogen, it is best to avoid wounding oaks from February thru June, and to paint wounds year-round.



aka Escarpment Live Oak is a member of the Beech family (Fagaceae)

ASHE JUNIPER, *Juniperus ashei*, is a native evergreen tree or large shrub that people either love or hate. It has always been found from the Ozark Mountains down through central & west Texas and into northern Mexico, but with the control of fire over the past 150 years it has expanded its range into open woodlands and grasslands. It is known to form dense stands called "cedar brakes," where average rain events are impeded by scale-like leaves, fine twigs, and limbs which act like a sponge reducing the amount of water reaching the ground. Male cedars produce golden cones that emit large volumes of pollen (see photo) that create allergic reactions in many Hill Country residents who suffer from "cedar fever." Female trees make berry-like blue cones whose sweet flavor is sought by birds and mammals, and Gin drinking humans. During dry winters, deer consume the evergreen foliage for its carbohydrates, and in spring its flaking bark is used by the endangered Golden-cheeked Warbler in nest building.



aka Mountain Cedar is a member of the Cypress family (Cupressaceae)

By Eric Beckers, Natural Heritage Committee
Hays County Historical Commission