

WHAT'S HAPPENIN' ON THE HILL

NATURAL HISTORY OF HAYS COUNTY

Beacon Hill, Texas

March 2022

SHADY CHARACTERS

The long-awaited green up appears to be here and soon the warm sun will encourage a rush to springtime. That same sun, so friendly to most of our Hays County plants, eventually turns hot and unbearable to a number of shade tolerant plants that quickly fade when caught out in the open. On our hill two plants are often found deep in the shadows and they give us a glimpse of the greener days ahead.

BEDSTRAW, *Galium aparine*, an annual herb found trailing along the ground underneath trees and shrubs across much of Texas and North America. It has slender square stems and whorled leaves, all of which are covered with fine hooked hairs that cling to man and beast as they pass by. The white flowers develop into small fruits that are also festooned with hairs and with the help of passersby the seeds inside are spread near and far to start the plant next year in new shady places. Two other species of "cleavers," Texas and Southwest Galium, grow in this area and also cleave to cloth and fur. The leaves and stems of bedstraw can be chopped and steeped to make a tea rich in Vitamin C, and the fruit can be roasted and made into a coffee substitute. Botanist Carl Linnaeus first described this plant and the related *Galium verum* in the 1700's, with the latter plant, because of its fragrant foliage, being used in Europe and the Middle East for hundreds of years to stuff mattresses.



aka Stickywilly is a member of the Madder family (Rubiaceae)

PENNSYLVANIA PELLITORY, *Parietaria pensylvanica*, is a small annual herb found in shady locations across most of North America. Early season growth is characterized by fuzzy oval leaves and red colored stems. As the plants grow, the alternately arranged leaves become more lance-shaped and the stem becomes green. The simple leaves are covered in fine hairs and will readily cling to hands and clothing and, unlike other members of the Nettle family, this plant fortunately lacks stinging hairs. Tiny flowers are clustered at the leaf axils up and down the small stems. Caterpillars of the beautiful and fast flying Red Admiral butterfly feed on the foliage of this and other Nettle family plants. Small birds, particularly sparrows, are reported to eat the seeds. The young leaves have a cucumber flavor which gives the plant another common name. Lutheran minister and botanist, Gotthilf Muhlenberg, described this plant in his home state of Pennsylvania soon after the end of the American Revolution.



aka Cucumber Weed is a member of the Nettle family (Urticaceae)

By Eric Beckers, Natural Heritage Committee
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