

WHAT'S HAPPENIN' ON THE HILL NATURAL HISTORY OF HAYS COUNTY

Beacon Hill, Texas

June 2022

NATIVE TEXANS

Hays County is home to hundreds of species of native plants and most of these are also found in neighboring states or even neighboring countries. However, a much shorter list of species is endemic to Texas, that is they are found only in the Lone Star state. Some, like the elusive Texas barberry, are encountered in just Hays and a couple of other nearby counties. These two are also Texas specialties.

TEXAS YUCCA, *Yucca rupicola*, is an evergreen perennial shrub found only in Texas on the Edwards Plateau. It grows well on the rocky limestone soils of our Hill Country in prairies and open woodlands. The dark green to yellowish green leaves are 1-2' long and 1" wide with an obvious twisted shape which gives the plant another of its common names, Twistleaf yucca. After maturity, this yucca will yearly send up a 3-6-foot-tall flowering stalk composed of dozens of 2" bell-shaped flowers which are often consumed by hungry white-tailed deer. This species of yucca does not form a trunk as do half-a-dozen other Texas species. In all, there are approximately three dozen yuccas found exclusively in warmer areas of North America with more than a dozen found in Texas. American Indians have long relied on these yuccas for food, medicine, soap and fiber. The petals are tasty as are the ripe fruit pods of some species, and the tough leaves provide fiber for items like rope, mats and footwear with the leaf tip serving as needle and attached fiber as thread.



Texas yucca is a member of the Century-plant family (Agavaceae)

TEXAS GRAMA, *Bouteloua rigidiseta*, is a small, tufted perennial grass found across most of Texas, as well as limited areas of SW Oklahoma and NE Mexico. It is extremely durable to dry, open terrain and is often found on overgrazed rangelands. It is one of the smallest grasses of the roughly forty native grass species found here on the hill. The wiry bunch of short, narrow leaves is topped by a flower stem barely a foot tall. After pollination, some say the little seed clusters look like "starbursts on a stick." This curious and aesthetic looking little grass was once called bell grama in reference to these seed heads. Although this tiny grass is not prized by ranchers for its forage value, it is sought by seed seeking birds and small mammals who also use it in den and nest building. There are at least four grama grass species found in this part of Hays County, including the State Grass of Texas, Sideoats Grama.



Texas grama is a member of the Grass family (Poaceae or Gramineae)

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