

WHAT'S HAPPENIN' ON THE HILL
NATURAL HISTORY OF HAYS COUNTY
Beacon Hill, Texas
July 2022

WHERE EAST MEETS WEST

The Edwards Plateau has long been described as a meeting place where several ecoregions come together. The Great Plains, Chihuahuan Desert, Coastal Plains and Southeastern Woodlands all converge here in central Texas offering our unique region a special mix of plants and animals. Hays County is well positioned to be home for easterners and westerners alike, and here are two good examples from opposite ends.

TURK'S CAP, *Malvaviscus arboreus* var. *drummondii*, is a medium sized perennial shrub that prefers partially shady locations that harbor sufficient moisture for its vigorous growth. This hibiscus-like plant ranges from the Hill Country of Texas south into Mexico and eastward to Florida and the island of Cuba. In our area, the plant tends to freeze to the ground most winters, but then quickly grows back to 3-4' by summer when it puts on a show of bright green leaves and unusually shaped, scarlet-colored flowers. The curious petals fold over each other forming a tube that resembles a Turkish turban. Nectar-rich tube-shaped flowers are a favorite of insects like butterflies and moths, and likewise to tiny hummingbirds. It is believed that our black-chinned and ruby-throated hummingbirds also act as pollinators when visiting this plant. Pollinated flowers develop into a small berry-like fruit that is edible either raw or cooked. The apple flavor lends another name, Manzanilla (Little Apple).

aka Texas mallow is a member of the Mallow family (Malvaceae)



GRAY GOLDEN-ASTER, *Heterotheca canescens*, is a short, aromatic perennial that forms colonies spreading to 6-10' across. It is found growing in the full sun of prairies and brushlands across the Edwards Plateau through western Texas into New Mexico and north into Oklahoma and Kansas. Clusters of silvery leaved stems change dramatically during summer when bright yellow blossoms cover the tops of the one-foot-tall plants. These nectar producing flowers attract countless numbers of pollinators during the long hot days of summer. Also attracted to these golden colors are predators like the **Green Lynx Spider, *Peucetia viridans***, seen here at right. These amazing creatures sit aloft on the plant awaiting the arrival of an unsuspecting insect, and then pounce like a cat with blazing speed to secure their next meal. This aster's scientific name was reclassified by noteworthy SMU botanist Lloyd H. Shinnery (1918-1971).

Gray golden-aster is a member of the Aster family (Asteraceae)



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