

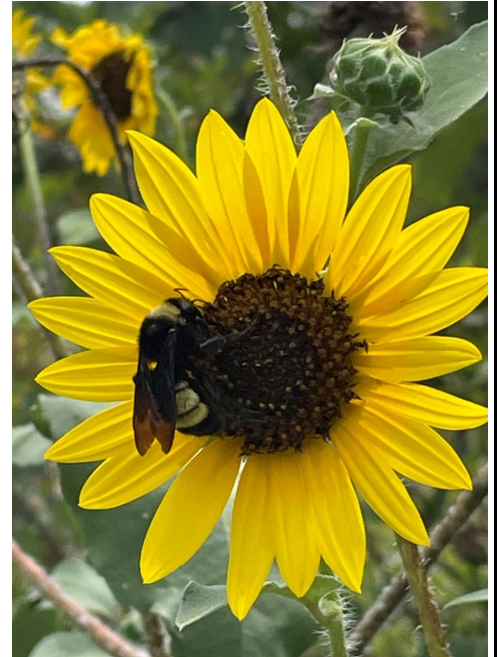
WHAT'S HAPPENIN' ON THE HILL NATURAL HISTORY OF HAYS COUNTY

Beacon Hill, Buda, Texas
August 2021

NEAR AND FAR

Hays County is home to several hundred native species of plants and animals that have adapted to our area over thousands if not millions of years. When determining whether an organism is native to a particular piece of land it is important to know its home range or habitat. These two plants have quite different natural ranges that overlap here, and they are both extremely well suited to life on Beacon Hill.

COMMON SUNFLOWER, *Helianthus annuus*, is an annual herb that grows from a seed up to an 8' tall spreading plant in one season. Native across much of North America, this amazing plant has been cultivated by American Indians for thousands of years providing food, medicines, oil and dyes. Spanish explorers in the 16th century helped spread this sunflower to Europe and its popularity encouraged its distribution throughout much of the world where it remains an important food and oil source. Along with being a good livestock feed, this plant is a vital food source to native bees and insects, and the rich seeds are eagerly consumed by birds and small mammals. The Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus first described this plant in the 1700's. He became famous for developing a binomial system for naming living things using genus and species names that assured there would be no duplications, a problem when using common names. The sunflower is the state flower of Kansas.



Common Sunflower is a member of the Aster family (Asteraceae)

TEXAS PERSIMMON, *Diospyros texana*, is a deciduous to semi-evergreen shrub or small tree that grows in the limited range of Central Texas, west to the Trans-Pecos and south into NE Mexico. It is a member of the Ebony family, which has many hundreds of species found mostly in the tropics. This small tree has smooth gray bark that can be very attractive. Small male and female flowers are usually found on separate trees and after pollination the female flowers develop into edible 1" black fruit. The small leathery leaves and round fruit are covered with fine, soft hairs. The fruit (a berry) is sweet and readily consumed by birds and mammals--and humans who know the meaning of the genus name as "fruit of the gods." The plant was first described by German botanist and 19th century explorer Georg Heinrich Adolf Scheele, who named several other plants found in Central Texas including Kidneywood and Texas Sotol. This is a tough, drought tolerant plant that is at home in the Texas Hill Country.



aka Mexican Persimmon is a member of the Ebony family (Ebenaceae)

By Eric Beckers, Natural Heritage Committee
Hays County Historical Commission