

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

Beacon Hill, Texas
September 2022

LIKE A SECOND SPRING

What a difference two weeks of rain makes to a hot and drought-parched land. After struggling through many months of unusual weather, plants on Beacon Hill came alive again with abundant rain and cooler temperatures. Dozens of species, from grasses to trees, pushed out new green growth and flowered like it was spring again. Hungry animals of all sizes, from bees to deer, were attracted to plants like these.

PIGEONBERRY, *Rivina humilis*, is a perennial herb that grows in moist shady areas across the southern US from Florida to Arkansas and west to Arizona, then south through Texas and Mexico and Central America, all the way to South America and the Caribbean. This little plant tends to grow in small colonies on protected sites found from rocky hillsides to stream bottoms. The 1-3' tall plant has many branches that are covered in 1-3" glossy, heart-shaped leaves that are soon accompanied by pink and white flowers in long clusters that arise from the leaf axils. The berries that develop are first green, but then turn a showy translucent red and sometimes white. They have been used to create dyes and cosmetics which gives the plant another common name - Rouge Plant. Birds readily consume the bright berries as they ripen, but all parts of this plant are toxic to humans. In late fall Pigeonberry will turn a colorful reddish hue before going dormant for the winter.



Pigeonberry is a member of the Pokeweed family (Phytolaccaceae)

TEXAS KIDNEYWOOD, *Eysenhardtia texana*, is a medium to large shrub growing to over ten feet tall. It is found across Central and Trans-Pecos Texas and on south across the Rio Grande into Mexico. It is encountered on well-drained soils, that are often dry and rocky, on brushy slopes and in open country. Kidneywood is very drought tolerant, but in February 2021 its cold tolerance was tested. This far north in its native range, most of them on Beacon Hill died back to the low trunk or roots. However, they have grown vigorously over the past two years, almost regaining their original size. Crushed leaves give off a strong citrus smell, but the showy white clusters of flowers are sweetly fragrant. The flowers attract bees and butterflies, and this year's huge migration of American snout butterflies are busy nectaring here. A Dogface butterfly larvae can be seen in this photo feeding on the flower spike to the left.



Kidneywood is a member of the Pea or Bean family (Fabaceae)

By Eric Beckers, Natural Heritage Committee
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