

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

UNEXPECTED BEAUTIES

Late summer has turned dry across Hays County and many plants in our area have called it quits for the year. Fortunately for us and local wildlife, some plants have managed to stay on schedule and produce flowers and fruit. Plants like Fall Aster, Frostweed, and Evergreen Sumac are providing nutritious meals to an untold number of life forms. Likewise, these two beauties are producing nectar and fruit for the multitudes.

TEXAS GAYFEATHER, *Liatris punctata* var. *mucronata*, is a perennial herb that grows on well-drained, rocky limestone soils of prairies and open woods from Central Texas north to Kansas and Missouri. The plant's tuberous root sends up multiple 1-3' tall stems each covered with very narrow leaves and topped with a spike of vividly colored flowers. These drought tolerant plants, with their bright pink to purple blossoms, are unexpected showstoppers during late summer and early fall. This plant makes a fine addition to a sunny rock garden where it attracts butterflies late in the growing season. Texas Gayfeather was reclassified by the late Billie Lee Turner (1925-2020), renowned botanist and professor at the University of Texas. During his amazing 60-year career, Professor Emeritus Turner wrote hundreds of publications, including several important botanical books. He had a passion for field research and for the UT herbarium which now bears his name.

aka Texas Blazing Star is a member of the Aster family (Asteraceae)



AMERICAN BEAUTYBERRY, *Callicarpa americana*, is a medium-sized perennial shrub growing to over six feet tall. It is found on moist, partly sunny locations from Central Texas north to Oklahoma and eastward across the Southeastern US. This moisture-loving plant should be unexpected on the dry Edwards Plateau, but protected canyons and valleys of the Balcones Escarpment and eastern Hill Country provide just enough water to allow it to flourish. The egg-shaped leaves are arranged oppositely along the twig and have sawtooth edges. The tiny pink to lavender flowers form at the leaf axils and are followed by showy clusters of purple fruit. This fruit is consumed by both large and small mammals and dozens of species of birds. American Indians used parts of this plant to treat stomachaches, dysentery and cholera. Modern research supports early American use of crushed leaves to repel mosquitoes and ticks.

aka French Mulberry is a member of the Verbenaceae family



By Eric Beckers, Natural Heritage Committee
Hays County Historical Commission