

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

Beacon Hill, Buda, Texas

December 2021

DECK THE HALLS

Gazing out from our hill at all the twinkling lights its evident the holiday season has arrived. Just 3 generations ago, before electricity came to the Hill Country, people found other ways to usher in this festive time. They used candles, oil lamps, and Yule logs to cheer up the long winter nights, and they decorated with garlands, wreaths and cedar Christmas trees that added their own joyous charm. Some are still favorites.

YAUPON HOLLY, *Ilex vomitoria*, is an evergreen shrub or small tree found across the southern US from the Edwards Plateau eastwards to Arkansas and across to Virginia and Florida. On our dry plateau the plants often favor protected sites with more moisture. This holly has either single or multiple trunks and the smooth bark is whitish-gray in color. This is a dioecious plant, meaning the male and female flowers occur on separate shrubs and trees. Branches of female plants are covered with evergreen leaves and bright red berries making it a longtime favorite across the South for Christmas decorations. The small leathery leaves, arranged alternately along the stem, are rich in caffeine and American Indians and pioneers alike made a stimulating tea from the dried leaves. As early as the 1560's, Spaniards in St. Augustine, Florida adopted the so called "black drink" from the local Timucua tribe. This versatile native plant is still used for tea and is very popular in landscapes across much of Texas.



Yaupon is a member of the Holly family (Aquifoliaceae)

CHRISTMAS MISTLETOE, *Phoradendron tomentosum*, is a small evergreen shrub that is parasitic on trees. There are hundreds of species found around the world and this one is native across much of Texas and into a few neighboring states like Oklahoma and Louisiana. Poisonous to humans, birds relish the white translucent fruit and disperse the seeds to other trees where germination occurs and new plants form. Growing into a tree branch, the semi-parasitic shrub develops brittle stems with green leaves that allow photosynthesis and the production of sugars, but it also robs the tree of vital water and nutrients. This can be damaging to the host tree and in our area cedar elm and sugarberry trees are particularly impacted. Thousands of years ago mistletoe was held sacred by the Celtic Druids and used both in ceremonies and medicines. The Greeks, Romans, and Norse held it in high regard. It then moved into Christmas traditions and was popularized in songs like "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus."



Mistletoe is a member of the Christmas Mistletoe family (Viscaceae)

By Eric Beckers, Natural Heritage Committee
Hays County Historical Commission