

WHAT'S HAPPENIN' ON THE HILL

NATURAL HISTORY OF HAYS COUNTY

Beacon Hill, Buda, Texas

March 2021

WHAT'S FOR DINNER?

People have utilized native plants in this region for thousands of years. American Indians have used various plant parts for food, fuel, dyes, medicines, and useful and decorative arts. European pioneers relied on many of these same plants in order to survive on the challenging frontier. From roots to fruits, inner bark to wood, plants have been sought out for their special qualities. Here are two of those plants.

WILD HYACINTH, *Camassia scilloides*, is an herbaceous native perennial found from the Edwards Plateau north to Wisconsin and east to Pennsylvania. The long, lily-like basal leaves, born from an underground bulb, give rise to a 1-2.5' tall cluster of 1" lavender flowers. The genus name was derived from a tribal name Kamas, meaning sweet, in reference to the bulb. Across North America, at least 6 species of Camas bulbs were dug, cooked and eaten by native peoples. Other edible members of the Lily family, like onions (*Allium* spp.) and sotol, were also deemed desirable. Archeological records from the Edwards Plateau, and especially from dry caves along the Lower Pecos River, indicate these plants were cooked in earth ovens that over time would lead to burned rock midden formation. **CAUTION:** as the Wild Hyacinth may also bloom white, it must not be confused with the toxic, white blooming Death Camas (*Zigadenus nuttallii*).



Wild Hyacinth is a member of the Lily family (Liliaceae).

AGARITA, *Mahonia trifoliolata*, is an evergreen medium-sized shrub with very spiny three-part leaves (see Latin name). It grows on the Edwards Plateau westward to NM and AZ and into Mexico. There are 3 other species in Texas and Native Americans utilized them all for either food, medicines or dyes. The roots were used to produce decoctions for ailments, such as an upset stomach, as well as for the production of a yellow dye. The delicious red fruit follows the sweet-smelling lemon-yellow flowers that are usually as dependable as the return of Purple Martins in late February and early March. However, as the "Currant-of-Texas" was in bud when this year's record cold February hit, fruit development will be limited to protected low lying branches. As such, agarita wine and jelly production on Beacon Hill will sadly be limited this year.



aka Agrito is a member of the Barberry family (Berberidacea).

By Eric Beckers, Natural Heritage Committee
Hays County Historical Commission