

WHAT'S HAPPENIN' ON THE HILL

NATURAL HISTORY OF HAYS COUNTY

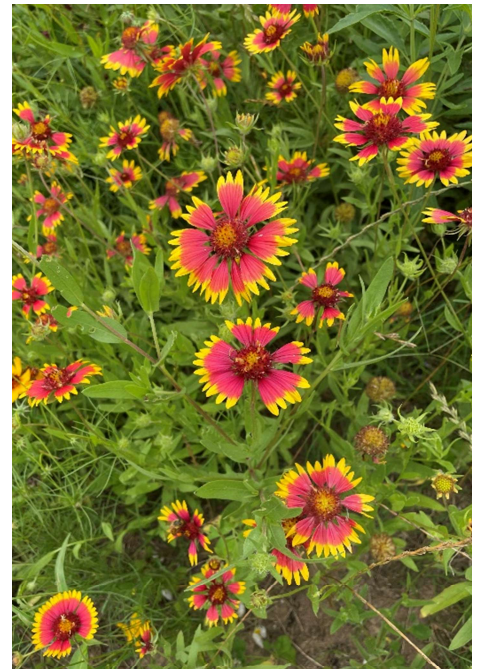
Beacon Hill, Buda, Texas

June 2021

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

Abundant rains in May have allowed spring to continue its spectacular show of wildflowers across Hays County. Early spring flowers have faded while new players have taken the field, and a kaleidoscope of colors continues to blanket the ground. However, if one takes a closer look, you might find that not all is as peaceful as it first appears. Most early summer bloomers are doing their best to attract pollinators, but a small number of plant species also have more sinister plans. Dangers are lurking just out of view.

INDIAN BLANKET, *Gaillardia pulchella*, is an annual wildflower naturally found in prairies from the southeastern states through Texas and westward to Arizona and north to Nebraska. There are more than two dozen species in this genus in temperate North and South America. The Indian Blanket's beautiful red and yellow, 1-2" wide flowers bloom on top of a 1-2' tall, many branched, hairy stemmed plant. Often found in abundance, the Firewheel, as it is also called, is an early summer favorite in many states, in part due to its heat and drought tolerance. Indeed, it is Oklahoma's State Wildflower. Ease of cultivation and availability has led to its widespread distribution in the US and Europe. The genus name honors a French magistrate and patron of botany, Gaillard de Charentonneau, who received and grew seeds collected in Louisiana in the late 1700's, during the Age of Enlightenment.



Indian Blanket is a member of the Aster family (Asteraceae)

CUSP DODDER, *Cuscuta cuspidata*, is an annual parasitic vine found throughout Texas and much of the Central US. Often difficult to tell apart, there are dozens of species in the US and around 150 in the world. The beautiful white flowers belie the notorious intent of this parasite. These plants have no chlorophyll and must rely on host plants for their food. Twining, orange colored, spaghetti-like stems sink root-like organs called haustoria into their victims through which juices are absorbed. Host plants, often members of the Aster family, are weakened and sometimes die. Many of the American dodders, including this species which is also called Angel Hair, were first described by German-American botanist George Engelmann. He worked closely with our local botanists Ferdinand Lindheimer and Charles Wright in the mid-1800's. This genus of plants has been used around the world in traditional medicines.



Angel Hair is a member of the Morning Glory family (Convolvulaceae)

By Eric Beckers, Natural Heritage Committee
Hays County Historical Commission