

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

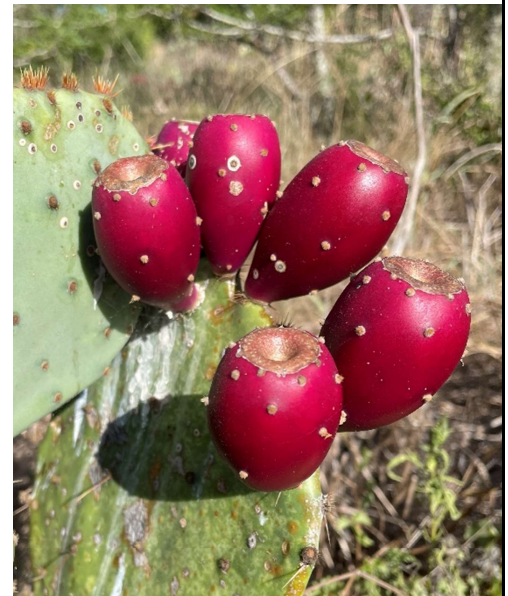
Beacon Hill, Texas
August 2022

HOTTER THAN HOT

After one of the hottest and driest July's on record, it has been reassuring to see many plants here on the hill going about business as usual. The color green seems to be harder and harder to find, but certain plant species continue to thrive in the heat and drought producing fruit and seed to benefit their kind and the animals that depend on them. Here are two that tough it out even during the most difficult of times.

PRICKLY PEAR, *Opuntia engelmannii*, is a perennial shrub that grows in sunny locations from the southern and southwestern US down into much of Mexico. Growing especially well in dry, well-draining soils of prairies, open woodlands and deserts, this cactus will grow to five feet in height and obtain a spread of 10 feet. Its cold tolerance was tested in the record freeze of February 2021, and many of the cactus on the hill were temporarily damaged. The springtime 2-4" flowers are very showy with colors ranging from yellow to orange and red, and are attractive to numerous species of insects including bees and beetles. The crimson-colored fruit that follows in mid-summer is a nutritious meal savored by animals and humans alike. American Indians, being cautious handling the thorny plant, utilized the pads, flowers, pears and seeds for food and medicine. The plant is named for German-American botanist George Engelmann who sponsored early collectors in our Texas Hill Country.

aka Cactus Apple is a member of the Cactus family (Cactaceae)



PRAIRIE ACACIA, *Acaciella angustissima*, is a perennial sub-shrub that grows 1-3' tall and often colonizes an area by way of sprawling woody roots called rhizomes. This drought and heat tolerant legume is found in the open country of prairies and savannas from the southern Great Plains into Louisiana and west through Texas and Arizona and on south into Mexico. This attractive plant has soft feathery foliage composed of dozens of tiny leaflets and is free of the thorns that beset the formerly related acacias. The half inch round creamy white flowers are attractive to butterflies and develop into slender brown seed pods. The plant is high in protein and will be heavily grazed by livestock. Therefore, its presence is an indicator of good range conditions. This graceful small shrub will drop its leaves and freeze back to the ground each winter. The very small, narrow leaflets give this plant its Latin name of *angustissima*.

aka Fern Acacia is a member of the Pea or Bean family (Fabaceae)



By Eric Beckers, Natural Heritage Committee
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