

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

Beacon Hill, Buda, Texas

October 2021

A DIFFERENT HOT

Even as the mean weather of September fades into memory, a cooler and wetter October brings welcome surprises to the land. Bumblebees seem to have doubled their foraging efforts; squirrels hurriedly gather pecans; and birds gobble up all they can. Plants create waves of hot pink flowers and splashes of spicy hot fruits to escort in the change of seasons. As Hays County cools down, some things are still hot on the hill.

PRAIRIE FALSE FOXGLOVE, *Agalinis heterophylla*, is an annual herb growing upright to sprawling from 1-4' tall, and is found from Georgia to Kansas and on down to the southern tip of Texas. This semi-parasitic plant produces sugars through photosynthesis, but may also rob nutrients from the roots of nearby plants. It grows well in open woodlands and prairies with adequate moisture. The multiple wiry branches, that can take on a purplish color, support narrow leaves that are arranged oppositely along the twig. The 1" tubular flowers are showy, especially when large numbers of plants are found together. Many species of insects are attracted to the flowers that are bright pink and sometimes white. Small purple spots color the throat of the flower. This plant is a member of the Figwort family which includes plants like Texas sage and the invasive mullein. Recent genetic analysis has diminished this family from 5,100 to 1,800 species and reassigned similar looking snapdragons and penstemons to other families.



aka Prairie Agalinis is a member of the Figwort family (Scrophulariaceae)

CHILE PEQUIN, *Capsicum annuum*, is a perennial short-lived shrub found from the southeastern US west through Texas and south into the tropics. The upward reaching, many branched plants grow from 2-6' tall and do well with partial shade, such as along brush and woodland edges. The plant has small oval leaves arranged alternately along the stem. Small white flowers sprout from leaf axils and give rise to small green peppers that mature into bright orange and red colors. This is a very hot, edible pepper that receives its pungent flavor from a substance called capsaicin that is concentrated along the fruit's inner ribs where the numerous seeds are attached. This pepper has been cultivated in Mexico for thousands of years and has been bred to produce familiar Bell, Chili, Cayenne, Jalapeno, and Pimiento peppers. Spaniard Francisco Hernandez led the first scientific mission to the New World in 1570 and after 7 years collected 3,000 species, including cacao, chilis, corn, tobacco, tomatoes, and vanilla.



aka Bird Pepper is a member of the Night Shade family (Solanaceae)

By Eric Beckers, Natural Heritage Committee
Hays County Historical Commission