

Trippin' on the Wildside

By Bill Swantner, Bexar County Master Gardener



Prickly pear cactus and upright prairie coneflower.

Besides being an avid gardener, I'm also an avid cyclist. For whatever reason, these two passions have become one this year.

In Bexar County we are very fortunate to have a great trail system; I ride Leon Creek Greenway 2-3 times a week. Depending on how you choose to ride it, from end-to-end Leon Creek is 30-40 miles of winding concrete, over Leon Creek and under bridges. I usually catch Leon Creek on Mainland because it's roughly the mid-point on the trail; the ride to the north or south is about 1 ½ hours out and back. This time of year, the temperatures are still cool, and it feels great to have the wind blow through your helmet as your AirPods plays Donovan, the Byrds, Cream, and Creedence.

On any typical ride my primary attention is focused on watching for other cyclists, joggers, nervous deer grazing very close to the trail, and an occasional snake. Snakes get your attention. But recently my rides have changed.

I was riding the other day and my attention was drawn to blankets of pollinators fluttering around fields of color. After a couple of miles, I slowed down to see splotches of purple and yellow, fields of blue and white and orange. My slower speeds turned into stops as I pulled out my phone, brought up an app that identifies plants and started taking pictures. The app put names to these plants and my 1 ½-hour bike ride turned into a 2-hour ride.

Some of these beautiful wildflowers had names as beautiful as their color:



Four-nerve daisy
(*Tetraneris scaposa*)



Silverleaf nightshade
(*Solanum elaeagnifolium*)



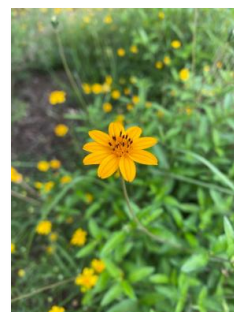
Frogfruit
a.k.a. turkey tangle
(*Phyla nodiflora*)



Bee balm
a.k.a. purple horsemint
(*Monarda citriodora*)



Stiff greenthread
(*Thelesperma filifolium*)



Hairy wedelia,
a.k.a. zexmenia
(*Wedelia acapulcensis* var. *hispid*)

The more I rode, the slower I rode; and instead of seeing colors, I was naming plants: hairy wedelia, horseherb, cedar sage, white prickly poppy, four-nerve daisy, prairie sandbur, and Texas vervain.



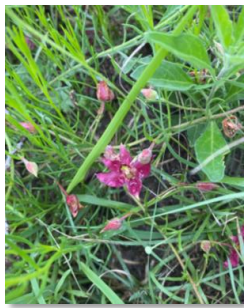
Horseherb
a.k.a. Straggler daisy
(*Calyptocarpus vialis*)



Cedar sage
(*Salvia roemeriana*)



Prickly pear cactus
(*Opuntia* spp.)



Prairie sandbur
(*Krameria lanceolata*)



Spiderwort
(*Tradescantia occidentalis*)



White prickly poppy
(*Argemone albiflora* spp. *texana*)

I remembered seeing some of these flowers growing in neighborhood landscapes, where they're sometimes referred to as weeds. But out here, along the trails and the paths, these wonders of nature really shine. In their natural habitat, where these flowers can bloom freely, these plants have names: Texas thistle, annual bastard cabbage, wild poinsettia, evening primrose, upright prairie coneflower.

With the emerging of these two passions, I have noticed that my bike rides take a little longer, my mind naming each plant, knowing each plant as I know the name of each plant in my garden. Sometimes I come to a screeching halt as I see a flower that I haven't loaded into my app's garden... and I learn something new.

This summer, perhaps in the early morning or later evening when the temperatures are somewhat pleasant, grab a friend and your phone, get an app that recognizes plants, and take a trip on the wildside of landscapes.



Upright prairie coneflower
a.k.a. Mexican hat
(*Ratibida columnifera*)