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Hill Country growers open their fields to the public, all ...

## FOR THE LOVE OF LAVENDER

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Correction: Setting it straight - Because of an editing error in today's S.A. Life section, the Web addresses for two participants in the Hill Country Lavender Trail were transposed. The correct URLs are [www.hillcountry-lavender.com](http://www.hillcountry-lavender.com) for Hill Country Lavender and [www.beckervineyards.com](http://www.beckervineyards.com) for Becker Vineyards Lavender Field. (20020615)

### Article Text:

As single blossoms go, lavender is but a whisper. Alone, the tiny flowers would hardly garner a second glance. But en masse on slender spikes, the petite petals form an orchestra that swells to a crescendo of garden harmony.

The flowers are just part of the magic and mystery of the herb, which has been used since ancient civilizations for its good scents and its healing properties. The plant's evocative aroma - a seeming contradiction of both delicate and strong fragrances - stirs memories of mothers and grandmothers. In herbal medicine, lavender gains credit for relieving headaches, settling hyperactivity and insomnia, and warding off bacteria.

But the herb with a deep history also holds allure for Hill Country farmers, who hope to capitalize on the steady demand for dried flowers, oils and products such as candles, soaps and sachets that offer a whiff of lavender.

Five growers - scattered from Dripping Springs to Blanco to Fredericksburg and Willow City - will open their fields June 22 for the Hill Country Lavender Trail, offering the public a chance to experience fields of lavender.

Seeing lavender fields in France captivated Richard and Bunny Becker, and they decided to augment their vineyard near Stonewall with three acres of the gray-green lavender plants.

"We saw a field of lavender in Provence and almost ran off the road it was so fabulous," recalls Richard Becker, a San Antonio endocrinologist.

As the Beckers traveled through the fruit-growing region of the Mediterranean, they realized similarities to the Texas Hill Country. "We had the same weeds," says Bunny Becker, laughing at the recollection.

Like the Beckers, photographer Robb Kendrick was struck by the comparable climate and terrain. On assignment to photograph a story about perfume making for National Geographic magazine, Kendrick and wife Jeanie Ralston spent a month in Provence. As he photographed the harvest, Kendrick couldn't help but notice the heat - reminiscent of Texas - and the rocky soils that didn't receive much rain.

When he broached the subject of plowing up hay fields on their Blanco property to plant lavender, “I thought he was nuts,” says Ralston, a writer whose work runs in magazines such as Parenting, Redbook, Life and O.

Kendrick, as much a doer as a planner and dreamer, had watched the hay operation on part of his 200-plus acres and regretted having chemicals applied to his land. Lavender wouldn’t need much - if any - fertilizer or pesticides. It wouldn’t even need much water.

In 1999, they set out 2,000 lavender plants in a field centered around a majestic live oak at the farm they now call Hill Country Lavender. It was a year after the Beckers had planted 10,000 transplants and about the same time A.J. and Suann Waight fell under the lavender spell with six acres and 11,000 plants at their Provence Hill Farms in Willow City, northeast of Fredericksburg.

Like the Beckers and Kendrick and Ralston, the Waights became enamored of lavender in the South of France. And they, too, saw lavender as a new way of using the land.

All have planted lavender hybrids called lavandin, cousins of English lavender. The varieties, the same as those that cast the purple haze over French fields, are primarily ‘Grosso’ (Lavandula x intermedia ‘Grosso’) and ‘Provence’ (Lavandula x intermedia ‘Provence’). The Beckers also grow English lavender (Lavandula angustifolia), and Kendrick plans on setting out a new variety of English lavender known for its deep purple blooms, ‘Buena Vista’ (Lavandula angustifolia ‘Buena Vista’), in fall.

Having grown squash and tomatoes, Suann Waight said she and her husband wanted crops that could have longevity.

Says Kendrick, “What other crop in the state requires little water, no fertilizer and no pesticides and can be harvested 20 to 25 years?” He and Ralston added 4,000 plants in fall 2000, with lavender now covering more than four acres.

With tongue in cheek, the Hill Country group has dubbed itself the “lavender cartel.” As they plow into niche farming, the growers are exploring markets for their harvest.

When the Hill Country Lavender field burst into bloom last year, Ralston put her creativity to work marketing the bumper crop. She invited the public to come out on Saturdays to cut lavender bouquets, a tradition that has continued this year. For \$3.50 a bundle, guests can snip stems and immerse themselves in the heady aroma. The farm is open to the public from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturdays in June.

“We have people come here and are simply ecstatic to see a lavender field and get their hands on bunches of lavender,” Ralston says.

She also sells bouquets to Central Market in San Antonio and Austin and has designed pillows, room fresheners and car sachets. After one visitor remarked that lavender chases away moths, Ralston and Kendrick whipped up muslin bags of lavender moth repellent. They also blend dried lavender with citrus peel as an organic scorpion deterrent.

Lavender-laced picnics served under the stately oak tree bolster the crop’s coffers, as have aromatherapy workshops and seminars geared to potential growers.

The Waights sell potpourri, mainly to Fredericksburg retailers. Last year’s lavender bonanza yielded about 200 pounds of dried blooms, which can sell for as much as \$30 a pound.

At Becker Vineyards, lavender is dried for potpourri and made into wreaths and wands. Fresh bouquets also are available. The Beckers also put on the Lavender Festival, a free event with speakers and vendors. For a fee, guests can enjoy a lavender luncheon; reservations are required. This year's fest is planned for June 22 and 23, the first day coinciding with the Hill Country Lavender Trail.

Kendrick and Ralston planned to start distilling lavender to sell oil and water, much in demand from spas and other upscale retailers. But Mother Nature put the brakes on that venture after a dry and fickle winter.

That disappointment came after a brutal initiation into agriculture last spring. Buoyed by the success of the first 2,000 plants, Kendrick set out 10,000 more transplants in April 2000. In three days 90 percent of the plants had succumbed to rhizoctonia, a fungus that ravages the plant's roots. Other growers, too, have battled the fungus, which can be treated with fungicides.

Because Kendrick and Ralston have the goal of an organic farm - their certification on the 4,000 plants is due any day - they eschewed chemicals and replanted in fall.

The growers see potential for agri-tourism and are lobbying the Texas Department of Agriculture to form a co-op distillery for lavender.

"Lavender takes little out of the land, and people like to see it and smell it," Richard Becker says. "It's an attractive, novel use of Hill Country land, which is in tune with being a good steward of the land."

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### Growing lavender

Lavandins, the lavender varieties that do well in the Hill Country, like arid conditions. Provide well-drained soil, perhaps in a raised bed or on a berm. Don't overwater.

Because lavandins are hybrids, they produce sterile seed and must be grown from cuttings. Plant in fall to allow the plants to establish before the growing season.

Lavender doesn't need fertilizer, and isn't on the menu of deer, rabbits, grasshoppers or other foraging critters. Pesticides aren't necessary. The plants can fall victim to rhizoctonia, an often-fatal fungus. Treat with a fungicide or replace affected plants. Water properly to avoid the fungus.

Prune plants by one-third to one-half in January to encourage blooms.

### Drying the flowers

Harvest flowers in the morning and bundle stems with rubber bands. Hang bundles upside down in a dark, well-ventilated room. In low humidity, the flowers will dry in about four days. In higher humidity, allow a week or more.

See the lavender

Becker Vineyards: 10 a.m.-6 p.m. June 22, noon-6 p.m. June 23

Hill Country Lavender in Blanco: 8 a.m.-2 p.m. Saturdays in June

## More reading

‘Lavender: The Grower’s Guide’ by Virginia McNaughton (Timber Press, \$29.95).

‘The Lavender Garden’ by Robert Kourik (Chronicle Books, \$18.95).

‘Lavender: Growing and Using in the Home Garden’ by Tessa Eveleigh (Lorenz Books, \$19.95).

SOURCE: JEANNIE RALSTON, HILL COUNTRY LAVENDER (WWW.HILLCOUNTRYLAVENDER.COM)