

Day Trips

BY GERALD E. MCLEOD

Rows of lavender crawl over the rolling landscape west of Blanco like giant green caterpillars covered with purple hairs. The short bushes with fragrant blooms have become the newest cash crop of Central Texas.

“The Hill Country really lends itself to growing lavender,” says Jeannie Ralston at Hill Country Lavender in the Blanco River Valley. She and her husband Robb Kendrick, a photographer for National Geographic magazine, discovered lavender while on assignment in Europe. The climate and soil in the Valensole Plateau region of France where fields of lavender cover the landscape reminded them of the hills west of Austin.

Amazingly, about the same time, Richard and Bunny Becker were visiting wineries around Provence, France. The Beckers own Becker Vineyards outside of Stonewall, producers of award-winning wines that have been served at the White House and on finer tables around Texas. “On their trip to France, the Beckers noticed how much the terrain resembled the Hill Country,” says Nicole Bendele, a long-time employee of the vineyards.

Five years ago the Beckers planted three acres of lavender behind their winery. Despite losing some plants to last summer’s heavy rains, Bendele says the older plants are doing very well.

To celebrate this year’s harvest of the delicate purple blooms, Becker Vineyards will be hosting the Lavender Festival on June 21 and 22 at the winery with vendors selling lavender oils, soaps, and other products along with gardening tips, demonstrations, and live music. Of course, the winery will be open for tastings and food samples during the festival.

Joining the Beckers in the celebration, Hill Country Lavender and two other lavender farms will open their gates to visitors for the Hill Country Lavender Trail. Each stop on the trail offers something unique. At Lavender Hill, Charley and Ganell Pemberton’s farm at 1378 River Run on the western outskirts of Blanco will offer pick-your-own lavender in the field and an assortment of lavender-flavored products from 8am to 4pm (830/833-9097).

Just a short distance farther west of Lavender Hill off FM 1623 west of Blanco, Hill Country Lavender at 1672 McKinney Loop will open their fields to visitors with scissors, plus have plants for sale, lavender cookies, lavender lemonade, and other products (830/833-5008 or www.hillcountrylavender.com). “You have to get here early on Saturday to try the lavender ice cream,” Ralston says. “It’s great and always sells out on the first day.”

The fourth location on the Lavender Trail is Provence Hill Farms, 13 miles north of Fredericksburg off TX 16 on Eckert Road near Willow City. From 9am to 2pm the fields will be open, plus they will be selling lavender soaps, potpourri, sachets, and other products (830/685-3577).

“We’re trying to get people more aware of lavender and all the local farms,” Bendele says of the purpose of the Lavender Trail. “I think that people like it because it’s a plant that has so many uses.” Besides all of the products that can be made with lavender, it also has decorating, cooking, and medicinal uses. “And it reminds a lot of people of their grandmothers,” Bendele says with a smile.

The mildly sweet smell of lavender seems to have a calming effect on most people. It also has been known to

get rid of a headache and cure insomnia. Bendele says that during World War II the British used homegrown lavender as an antiseptic. A cousin to rosemary and sage, lavender adds a sweet and spicy flavor to foods.

Ralston says the chefs at Central Market in San Antonio developed a long list of recipes using lavender. It's not hard to imagine lavender-flavored teas, lemonade, and even honey and salad dressing, but lavender-flavored brownies, cakes, and cookies have to be tried to be understood. An enthusiastic supporter of raising lavender in Central Texas, Ralston and her husband have sponsored seminars for potential growers. By next year they hope to have as many as 11 farms participating in the Lavender Trail. "Maybe we can have Blanco proclaimed the 'Lavender Capital of Texas,'" she says.

As the bushes become maturer, the blooms last longer and become more predictable, Bendele says. Although the winery does not open its field to pick-your-own shoppers, the farms usually do on weekends. Picking season is usually during May and June with a second bloom in fall.