

June 7, 2003
Edition: FINAL
Section: Home
Page: 1

PROVENCE ON THE PERDERNALES

Business is bloomin' at Hill Country Lavender -- where one couple is living a dream born in southern France

Author: AMANDA ROGERS; Star-Telegram Staff Writer

Article Text:

Soft waves of sage-green plants with a lilac haze roll over the chalky white fields. The limbs of an ancient oak drape to the ground, forming a canopy of shade, a cool oasis from the sun. A soft breeze whispers across the fields, carrying the soothing smell of lavender in full bloom.

The sound of children's laughter sweetens the air before a Ford pickup rumbles down a country lane bordering the field, blasting George Strait.

Welcome to the Texas Hill Country, the updated edition.

National Geographic photographer and native Texan Robb Kendrick was shooting the lavender fields of Provence in southern France in 1997 when he had the idea.

"It was 104 degrees there," Kendrick remembers. "It looks like Texas -- hilly, and the soil is real rocky and well-drained. The soil is real alkaline. I said, 'That's like the Hill Country.'"

The idea stuck with him when he returned home to his 227 acres west of Blanco, a tiny town about 50 miles west of Austin.

"Idea No. 5,050," says wife, Jeannie Ralston, with a smile. "When we got home, he started planting different types of lavender. Then he decided to plant 2,000 plants."

A week after Ralston delivered their second son, Kendrick put their visiting families and friends to work, creating a lavender field in the alkaline caliche soil. That was March 1999.

"Jeannie kind of humored me along," Kendrick says, "but she's learned that when I set my mind, I'm going to do what I'm going to do."

Born in Tennessee, Ralston had grown up there and in Europe and was a magazine writer living in New York when she met Kendrick, who persuaded her to move to Texas. Three years in Austin had her loving the Lone Star State, but that was getting too crowded for Kendrick, who had decided he needed land, lots of land. But country life she did not adore.

“For the first three years, I really didn’t like it,” Ralston admits. “I can’t say the lavender changed the way I feel, but somewhere there I associated the lavender with change.”

At first she didn’t want anything to do with the stuff, but that all changed in spring 2001.

While Kendrick was on assignment in Salt Lake City, the lavender bloomed, a glorious display that caught even Ralston’s attention and gave her an idea of her own.

“I remember being in France,” she says. “You want to be in it. This was almost too good to keep to ourselves.”

So they put ads in the local papers, inviting people to come out to cut their own lavender or buy lavender plants to take home. About 600 people came during the six weekends of the blooming season.

She began to sell it to local florists and then, with Kendrick’s help, landed a deal with Central Market in Austin. Hill Country Lavender had arrived.

At first, Kendrick set out an irrigation system that covered half the crop. That year, though, he couldn’t tell any difference between the plants that had been watered and the ones that hadn’t. The fields haven’t been watered in 2 1/2 years, surviving on the 29 inches of annual rainfall that Blanco County receives, more than the 23 inches Provence averages.

That first season spoiled them, they admit. Last year was harder.

“The first year, we cruised into it,” Ralston says. “The second year, we had two late freezes, which caused smaller and fewer blooms. Then there was a spring drought and a grasshopper plague. They chewed on the stems, which caused them to break. Then we had 30 inches of rain in a week. We lost about 500 plants.”

This year, despite one late frost, has been almost as good as the first season, they say. More than 1,000 people visited on Memorial Day weekend, leading to an annual five-figure profit.

“The first year, we made enough to cover the expense of putting in all those plants,” Ralston says. “When people come to cut, that’s all profit.”

Determined to go organic so they can sell their lavender for soaps, oils and water, the couple does not use chemicals on their fields. No fertilizer, no pesticides, no need.

“In Europe, they use lavender instead of mothballs,” Kendrick says. “Insects and deer don’t like it. We have no game fence and we haven’t lost a single plant, and we have tons of deer. The neighbor’s goats got in and tasted 10 to 15 plants and spit it out.”

Even the grasshoppers didn’t like it, just tasted it enough to cause some stems to break. A battle with fungus on new plants is the only serious problem they have encountered. They bought 10,000 plants in spring 2000, begged and bribed all their friends to help plant -- and the plants all died three days later.

They replanted about half that many and now have about 6,000 plants covering 4 1/2 acres.

“It’s just spurts of work,” Ralston explains. “Robb sweeps with the tractor every few weeks, we hand hoe and we hand cut in November, cutting back about 40 percent of the plant, for six eight-hour days.”

The couple, without a doubt, has the best-smelling garage in Texas. Bundles of drying lavender hang from

hooks on a metal hog fence on the ceiling, sending a cascade of drying blooms to the floor. They're constantly finding new uses for the lavender -- even the leaves they cut back in the fall are sold to soap makers.

Hill Country Lavender isn't the only place in Central Texas that's taken a liking to lavender. Blanco County Extension agent Stephen Zoeller knows of four farms in his county raising the plants, one that's been doing it for eight or nine years. Hill Country Lavender is the only one doing strictly lavender, though, he says.

Diversification has become a way of life for the farmer, explains Beverly Boyd, spokesperson for the Texas Department of Agriculture.

"A lot of your traditional ranches across the state, the commodity prices have been so low you look for ways to diversify," she says.

Some folks have opened their farms to birding, hunting, vineyards, nature tours, bed and breakfasts, other herbs and vegetables.

The lavender growers have banded together and will be celebrating at the fifth annual Lavender Festival on June 21 and 22 in Fredericksburg with visits to the fields, luncheons, live music, cooking demonstrations and lots of lavender to buy.

Ralston, who is a contributing editor for Parenting and Ladies Home Journal, has people tell her that she is living their dream. They take pictures crouched among the blossoms, bring their paints and try to capture the colors or sit under the 450-year-old live oak in the middle of the field and enjoy one of Ralston's picnic lunches.

"Agritourism is what we're doing here," says Ralston. "We already have so much tourism in the Hill Country, this is just one more thing for people to do here."

Keeping lavender lovely

Want to bring a little lavender to your Metroplex chateau? You're going to have to do some groundwork.

Lavender will grow in our red clay or black dirt, but you'll need to make it feel at home, says Beth Hardin, owner of Green Mama's nursery, 5324 Davis Blvd. in North Richland Hills.

"It can be done," Hardin claims.

When you dig your hole to plant lavender, build a small mound in the bottom of the hole in the shape of a cone consisting of pea gravel or lava sand, then drape the lavender's roots over the mound, much like planting bare-root roses.

Then mix pea gravel or lava sand with the dirt you dug out of the hole and plant the lavender using the mixture. Plant lavender slightly above the soil line so that it doesn't sit in water.

Overwatering is the quickest way to kill lavender, the experts told us repeatedly.

"You need well-drained soil," Hardin says. "If the tops of the lavender start weeping over, wait until evening. If it perks up, that was heat stress. If it doesn't perk back up, it needs water. That's true of any plant, not just lavender."

The time of year you plant lavender is also important, explains Patricia Cowan, manager of Green Mama's and

co-author of Ladies of the Garden: A Journal.

“You can plant the 4-inch plants [plants in 4-inch containers] any time of year,” Cowan says. “Plant the quart to 1-gallon plants when it’s warmer. They have a bigger root system that helps them adapt better.”

The best time of year to plant, though, is the fall, as lavender growers Jeannie Ralston and Robb Kendrick discovered.

“From mid-September to Thanksgiving is the best time to plant, period,” Cowan says, “because of the cooler nights and cooler days. They have a better chance of survival.”

Lavender varieties for the Metroplex

- * Provence, which grows 3 to 4 feet tall
- * Dutch, which grows to about 3 feet tall
- * English, which grows to about 3 feet; does not do as well as the other varieties listed here
- * Spanish, which grows from 2 to 3 feet tall
- * Munstead, which grows from 18 to 22 inches tall
- * Hidcote, which grows from 18 to 22 inches tall

Putting lavender to good use

So what do you do with lavender, other than enjoy its natural beauty?

Well, you use it as a cut flower, dry it to use in potpourri or you can eat it. Yes, eat it! Lavender is an herb and in the mint family, a distant cousin of rosemary. And its mild, sweet taste has been used in all sorts of things, including ice cream and jelly.

The folks at Hill Country Lavender shared three ways to use lavender.

Dried lavender

Put lavender stems in a vase of water and use to decorate the table. When they start to droop, cut off the wet part of the stem, bind the stems tightly together with a rubber band and hang them upside down in a cool place out of direct sun. They’ll soon dry.

Use in potpourri.

Lavender lemonade

Make a pitcher of lemonade, either fresh or from concentrate.

Separately, make a lavender tea, using dried lavender wrapped in cheesecloth.

Let the lavender tea steep for 15 to 30 minutes; remove the lavender.

Pour the tea into the lemonade, using 1 cup of lavender tea per gallon of lemonade.

Add plenty of ice and a lavender sprig in each glass as garnish.

LAVENDER TEA COOKIES

* 1 tablespoon dried lavender flowers

* 1 cup butter, room temperature

* 2/3 cup sugar

* 1 teaspoon vanilla extract

* 1/4 teaspoon lemon extract

* 2 cups all-purpose flour

* 1/8 teaspoon salt

Grind lavender flowers with a mortar and pestle. Cream together ground lavender flowers, butter, sugar, vanilla extract and lemon extract. Add flour and salt; mix until dough is soft but not sticky. Refrigerate for 1 to 2 hours, until dough is firm.

Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Roll dough on a floured surface until it is 1/4-inch thick. Cut into shapes with cookie cutters and place on ungreased cookie sheets. Bake 12 to 15 minutes or until cookies are light brown around the edges. Frost with lavender frosting (recipe follows).

--www.whatscookingamerica.net

LAVENDER FROSTING

* 1 cup powdered sugar

* 2 tablespoons dried lavender flowers

* 2 tablespoons milk

* 2 teaspoons light corn syrup

Combine powdered sugar and dried lavender flowers in a small plastic bag. Let stand at least one day before using. Sift the mixture into a bowl, discarding flowers.

Add milk and corn syrup, mixing well. Additional powdered sugar or milk may be needed to make frosting easy to spread. Spread on cooled cookies.

----www.whatscookingamerica.net