

The Lure of Lavender

By Lana Robinson, Field Editor

Texas lavender lovers have an opportunity to sniff and snip lavender right here in their own backyard this fall when Hill Country Lavender's fields offer knee-deep blooms for the picking. Owners Robb Kendrick and Jeannie Ralston are gearing up for the second harvest of their fragrant crop, which seems to thrive in the region's rocky soil.

"We had 500 people on the last day of our fall season in 2002," notes Robb.

The Kendricks hand cut and make twice-a-week deliveries of fresh, fragrant lavender to H-E-B's Central Market in Austin and florists in Austin and San Antonio in spring and fall. And on Saturdays and Sundays from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. in late October and early November (see website for updates as the time approaches), Hill Country Lavender will welcome lavender aficionados wanting to cut their own balmy blooms for \$4 a bunch, which consists of about 30 or 35 stems from a plant that produces about 300 stems.

The lavender's first bloom occurs annually for a three to four week period beginning in late May, with more commercial cutting and people arriving to pick for pleasure at that time.

In addition to lavender cutting activities and opportunities to snap family photos against a beautiful backdrop of blossoms, those who call ahead for reservations can purchase boxed picnic lunches, to be enjoyed in the shade of a 350-year-old live oak at the edge of the field. Hill Country Lavender also sells dried lavender buds, lavender plants, lavender books, sachets and soap, as well as organically-grown produce, to visitors lured by the lavender.

At the end of the spring and fall seasons, remaining lavender stems are snipped, bunched and hung up to dry. The couple then sells dried lavender by the ounce (\$2), along with lavender products, such as sachets, lavender pillows, candles, soaps, lotion, and as an organic insect repellent, online.

Lavender Idea Takes Root

In 1997, Robb, a photographer for National Geographic, traveled to Southern France for a photo shoot involving perfume-making. He was fascinated with the Valensole Plateau region of Provence, where the hill-sides are covered with redolent rows of lavender bushes that look like purple porcupines when in bloom.

Convinced that the soil and climate were much like that of the Texas Hill Country, when he returned to his 225-acre farm between Blanco and Stonewall, he began experimenting with different types of lavender.

"It was a good time to do the test. We had all those successive days of 100-plus degree weather," Robb recalls.

The trials revealed that *lavandula intermedia*, the same variety he saw in Provence, was best suited for the Hill Country. So with advice from farmer friends in France, Robb and Jeannie planted 2,000 plants on two acres in 1999. Jeannie admits she was a bit skeptical at first, but the crop thrived, and then next year they added another 5,000 plants.

"Actually, we did have a disaster in-between," she says. "We're low tech around here, so we had our friends come out to help us plant 10,000 plants—transplants in little four-inch pots—in March, that second year. We had food and celebrated when we were done. In a matter of days, every one of those plants died. It was so disappointing. There was some problem with the plants from the nursery. Anyway, when we replanted, we decided to go back with 5,000, and see how they did before we expanded more."

In the spring of 2001, the couple harvested their first batch of lavender from the 2,000 original plants. In 2002, another 4,500 plants bloomed.

"We had 50 people a day for four or five Saturdays the first year. Each weekend, the crowd got bigger. It grew by word of mouth. Then we got a matching grant from TDA (Texas Department of Agriculture) for mar-

keting,” says Jeannie, who works from home—an interesting rock barn restored and enhanced by creative architects that overlooks the lavender field—as a free-lance writer and contributing editor for Parenting magazine. “We used that to construct the website and print posters, to look more professional. I wrote an article for Oprah magazine, National Geographic and Southern Living have also done articles. Since then, we’ve had as many as 200 cars out here at one time.”

The Kendricks’ current crop is four-and-a-half acres, but they are trying to buy land for expanding the plantings.

Lavender cultivation

According to Robb, lavender plants reach 32 inches in diameter. His are planted 3 feet apart in rows 6 feet apart.

A home gardener should keep in mind that lavender, an evergreen herb, likes well-drained soil with an alkalinity of 6.0 to 8.0. It does best in an area with a slight slope to help drainage.

“The most common mistake gardeners make with lavender is to give it too much water. Lavender does not like to have its feet wet. Err on the side of too little water, rather than too much, and when you water do not give the plants a soaking,” he advises, noting that he put out some drip tape for emergencies, but rarely waters.

“I cut it back at the end of the season, like slavia,” Robb continues. “I cut back 60 percent and leave 30 to 50 percent for the second bloom. I cut it back again, almost 35 percent, in November, so it will put on more flowers and keep a nice shape. I run a sweep through the rows for weed control. And we hand weedeed on occasions. We are organic.”

On occasions, the Kendricks hold seminars to help other growers get started, and to promote lavender as an agricultural crop, which they believe will create more demand. The next one—a hands-on seminar involving planting is planned on the farm, from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 1, and beginning early the next morning until planting is finished (see website for more details).

“We don’t feel threatened by the competition. In fact, we think it would be great if we could get something going like the Texas vineyard trail, where people could travel from Dallas or Houston, and have several opportunities to find lavender,” says Robb, adding that there are only about 300 acres of commercial lavender grown nationwide.

Robb and Jeannie have also collaborated on a book.

“We discuss all aspects of lavender growing in an information booklet we’ve put together,” says Jeannie. “The cost is \$35 a copy, and the packet includes information on different types of lavender, planting time and planting methods, water needs, fertilizers and how to be organic. It also discusses harvesting, drying, pricing and marketing.”

For now, Robb and Jeannie are content living on the farm with their two young sons, Gus, six, and four-year-old Jeb. They enjoy the pastoral lifestyle, selling fresh-cut lavender to retail stores, online sales and hosting carloads of lavender enthusiasts in season. They now have a distillery on the premises so that they can produce their own lavender oil and water and offer distilling services to other growers. If all goes well, people may soon identify lavender with Blanco in the same way nearby Stonewall is famous for peaches.

Lavender Lemonade

Every year, one of the most popular items at Hill Country Lavender’s cut-your-own lavender events is the Lavender Lemonade often sold by Gus and Jeb Kendrick. Many people ask for the recipe, which is amazingly simple:

Make lemonade either from scratch or concentrate. Separately, make a lavender tea, using either our dried lavender in cheesecloth or one of our lavender bath and tea bags. Let the tea steep for about 15 minutes; remove the lavender. Pour the tea into the lemonade. Use about one cup of lavender tea for every gallon of lemonade. Add plenty of ice, and a lavender sprig in each glass for a garnish.