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BLUE GOLD RUSH

Hill Country Lavender's Many Uses Include Cooking, Candles and Cologne

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Article Text:

The narrow back road dips into low-water crossings at creeks and rivers and curves through stands of oak and mesquite - typical Hill Country scenery, welcoming and expected.

But just ahead, through open gates, lies the not-so-expected: a field of blue-purple flowers with the euphoria-inducing scent of lavender. Rows of tourists in sunhats and caps bend over the mounds, snipping away at the aromatic blooms they pay to cut. Nearby, a small country store bursts with the intoxicating fragrance of lavender products.

For centuries, French shepherds gathered lavender growing wild on the hillsides to supplement their income. They called it blue gold. For the past few years, Hill Country viniculturists and farmers have been cultivating the plant for the same reason.

Lavender (*Lavandula officinalis*) has the compact shape of a multistemmed shrub and heavily scented gray-green leaves. It blooms between early April and late June, depending on the variety, and generally shows maximum flower production by its third year. The world market for lavender is its essential oil.

Mediterranean cultures have valued lavender for its scent and flavor for centuries. Greeks and Romans used lavender in their baths. Kings and queens put it between their sheets and on their bodies as a deodorant. The book *Herbs*, by Fredericksburg Herb Farm owners Bill and Sylvia Varney, says Napoleon poured lavender water on himself when he washed. Queen Victoria kept her castle filled with the scent.

And lavender is a necessity for making a proper love potion.

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Jeannie Ralston and her husband, photographer Robb Kendrick, fell in love with lavender in France.

"I just wanted to dive into a lavender field," Ralston recalls. They compared the French countryside to the Hill Country, and Kendrick said, "I'll bet we could grow lavender."

When they returned to their 225-acre farm near Blanco, he did some testing.

"We planted 2,000 plants in 1999," Ralston says, and Hill Country Lavender was born about the same time as their son. The plants did well, and they planted more. "It's all lavender all the way," she says.

The couple has helped organize a Lavender Trail through the Hill Country.

“I thought if I felt like diving into a lavender field, other people would, too,” Ralston says. “So that’s when we started opening our field to the public.”

The field beside their home is primarily for people to walk into and cut lavender.

“It’s agri-tourism,” she says . “The first year, Hill Country Lavender just had dinky signs, and we got maybe 300 people. In 2003, we had 16,000 people the seven weekends we were open.”

During the 2004 Lavender Trail, which begins May 22 and continues on weekends for about a month (depending on blooms), their new lavender store will be open.

“Most people want to go home with bunches of lavender and like to buy products while they are here,” Ralston says. “We also sell fresh-cut lavender to Central Market in San Antonio and the two Austin stores.”

They make and sell box lunches for picnics in the middle of their field under a huge, picturesque oak tree. Reservations are required.

“I have a friend who makes lavender ice cream. It goes like that,” Ralston says, snapping her fingers. “I have another friend who makes lavender tea cookies. We have lavender lemonade and a new thing, red lavender iced tea.”

Ralston and Kendrick are lavender gurus for new growers. They have encouraged others to plant in hopes of developing a cooperative to produce and market Texas Lavender Oil, produced by distilling the blooms.

In 2002, they conducted their first seminar. “Too many people were interested to tell individually,” Ralston says. They also formed a business with her father and brother, Jack and Jeff Ralston, both chemical engineers. Together they have built a “still.”

“It’s portable so we can distill other people’s lavender,” she says.

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The lavender of France also was the inspiration for Dr. Richard Becker and his wife, Bunny, owners of Becker Vineyards, to add lavender to their winery near Stonewall.

The winery building is a replica of a 19th-century limestone barn. Becker, an endocrinologist who practices in San Antonio, redesigned it with large antique doors and windows.

The Beckers opened a tasting room in 1996. “We started selling 2,500 cases a year, and now we are at 20,000 cases,” says Nichole Bendele, marketing and tasting-room coordinator for Becker Vineyards.

Visitors gravitate to the winery’s wisteria-draped patio to absorb the laid-back country setting. Here, during lavender blooming season, they are treated to the fragrant serenity of a lavender field planted six years ago.

Becker Vineyards will host the annual Hill Country Lavender Festival May 22-23. Besides cooking and craft-making demonstrations, 40 vendors will offer lavender in a variety of forms, from lavender chocolates to condiments to potted plants. Saturday and Sunday luncheons will use the herb in every course.

Lavender is a favorite of many chefs. At the San Antonio New World Wine and Food Festival in 2003, Rose Manning, executive pastry chef at Central Market, prepared a show-stopper lavender crème brûlée

“We do lots and lots of private parties and catering events where people ask for unique desserts,” Manning says. “That’s the area where we really get to shine and infuse lavender and other herbs and flowers into the items we make. We not only use lavender in desserts, but in brown sauces for lamb, and other things are delicious with lavender infused in it - sweet but savory as well.”

Manning says adding the lavender flavor is easy. “Take a lemon-custard tart recipe. The tart has a lemon-curd filling. To make it a lavender lemon tart, throw some fresh lavender flower into the curd while you are cooking it.

“Strain the lavender out at the very end, and the tart filling will have the lavender lemon flavor.”

Richard Kaplan, owner of Brown Paper Chocolates in Houston, combines lavender and white chocolate.

“I dust the bottom of the mold I use with lavender fleur de sel. Then I pour the chocolate mixture in it. When I turn it out, the fleur de sel is on top. So when you shave a piece of it off, you get all these different flavors, one after the other. Finally, the lavender really comes through.

“I put the lavender in hot heavy cream and let it steep and then put that in my chocolate. I’m taking it to the Lavender Fest,” he says, “It’s really unusual.”

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The uses of lavender are many. Richard Heinichen, owner of Tank Town and inventor of a rainwater-collection system, planted lavender to attract people to his business just west of Dripping Springs. Tank Town has four acres of lavender and rosemary in the foreground of a palette of pastel-painted rainwater-collection tanks, plus a tank on a hill painted to look like a huge red ladybug.

Heinichen found out the hard way that lavender fields require good drainage. He and his wife, Susie Banks, planted 4,000 Provence lavender plants and lost 1,500 of them in the July rains of 2001.

“Lavender loves to be on a slope,” he says. “It’s a Mediterranean plant. It’s been a learning process for what I call our little lavender cartel.”

Heinichen invites people on the Lavender Trail to stop in for lavender from his field to scent their cars and for a free bottle of “cloud juice.”

For Charley and Ganell Pemberton, it took little more than a mention from friends that farmers in the Hill Country had started to grow lavender. After consulting with Jeannie Ralston, they planted the herb on three of 11 acres they had bought near the Blanco River.

“It was just inside the (Blanco) city limits, a great piece of property,” Charley Pemberton, who retired from Merrill Lynch in Beaumont, says of the place known as Lavender Hill.

Last year his lavender plants averaged 300-400 blooming spikes - the parts of the plant that are harvested to make oil and other products. This year he expects about 600 blooming spikes per plant.

Pemberton bought a steam distillery to extract the essential oil. Besides distilling most of his lavender crop for

its oil, he will offer to distill crops for other growers, and he will put on distilling demonstrations during the Lavender Trail.

“Lavender oil has wonderful healing qualities,” he says. “Some people swear by it. There’s a man here who works with wood and skins his knuckles regularly. He keeps a little bottle of lavender oil in his pocket all the time and rubs it on the abrasions. He says it keeps them healed up.”

Everybody seems to be learning through experience, he says. “Right now there is no profit, but we’re just starting. A whim is now a way of life. I’m just amazed at how much interest there is in lavender.”

Susan and Billy Johnson, at Triple L Farms and Trading Post in Fredericksburg, are State Farm insurance agents and growers on the Lavender Trail. “We have our fingers crossed. Our plants look good, but you just never know in the Texas weather,” Susan Johnson says.

They moved from Austin to Fredericksburg in 2002.

“We bought an old place in the country on 18 acres. It was a stagecoach stop back when they drove cattle from Mason and Junction down to San Antonio,” she says. “There was an old inn here, but all that remains is the stable. We’re going to redo it when we win the lottery.”

Wanting to do something with the acreage, they talked to Ralston and Kendrick, then ordered 3,700 lavender plants and invited friends to help plant them. Six showed up, and it took three days.

“We were told the deer don’t like lavender. Well, the deer don’t like it, but they would pluck it out of the ground and spit it out,” Susan Johnson says. “So every weekend, we were replanting 50 to 100 plants. Finally we broke down and put up a deer-proof fence. It’s been a learning thing.”

During Lavender Trail weekends, their Trading Post, an old rough barn with a rusty metal roof and a front porch, will offer lavender products, and they plan to sell their personal overflow of antiques and collected junk.

“We have lots of that,” she says.

Johnson believes there is more money in agri-tourism than in distilling and selling the oil. “People that have been growing lavender longer have found that you truly can attract a lot of people who just want to come out for the weekend and walk around and cut some lavender and maybe buy some products.”

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At the Fredericksburg Herb Farm, the Varneys have been growing lavender and using it to make candles, room fresheners, aromatherapy products and colognes for about 20 years, Bill Varney says.

He also cooks with it, using lavender wands for shish kebab, for example. “But lavender has a floral essence, and you certainly don’t want to use too much,” he warns. “It’s way too overpowering.”

Varney has a diffuser that dispenses lavender in his bedroom. “It keeps the air pure and helps you stay well,” he says. “My sister-in-law, a doctor of internal medicine in Manhattan, recommends lavender to a lot of her patients who have trouble sleeping - people that don’t want to take drugs and things. It naturally relaxes you and calms you down.”

Gabriele van Hasz, a massage therapist at the Herb Farm’s Quiet Haus Spa, has an automatic spritzer to put a

light essence of lavender in the air.

“Many times, when my clients are on the table, under their nose I have put some lavender (oil) on the sheet so they can breathe it,” she says. She also uses lavender in water for her hot towels.

Lavender helps historic preservationist Darlene Marwitz satisfy her love affair with Italy. Her new shop in Fredericksburg, Villa Texas and the Lavender Market, emphasizes “creating la dolce vita at home,” she says.

“We have tried to find as many things as we can that help create the Italian lifestyle,” she says. “I remember seeing lavender so often in Italy growing around little fountains in the courtyards in Tuscany and Umbria. A lot of the same lavender you find in France, you find in Italy. I grew up in a rural background, ... and I love rural Texas the same way I loved the hills of Tuscany.”

Like others who sing lavender’s praises, Marwitz talks about its medicinal and calming qualities.

“We put lavender on our yellow lab puppy’s paws to calm her down. Our sister-in-law puts lavender in her grandchildren’s bath. It’s the whole idea about thinking about life in a calm, soothing way.”

Marwitz and her husband have planted 2,000 Provence lavender plants at their place on the Pedernales River. “You have to put in orders to growers months in advance to get plants,” she says

Gabriel Valley Farms east of Georgetown, owned by Cathy and Sam Slaughter, has added two greenhouses to grow lavender. A few years ago, they were selling 500-1,000 lavender plants annually; now it’s about 50,000.

Shane Dunford, owner of Nature’s Herb Farm in San Antonio, supplied Becker Vineyards with some of its lavender plants.

“Lavender has just become so popular over the last three or four years with people who want to start their own lavender fields,” Dunford says. In 2000, he sold about 6,000 plants; in 2003, he sold 30,000-40,000 lavender plants. This year, his farm has grown by 38 percent.

“Last year there was a shortage,” Dunford says. “Lavender has to be planned.”

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CELEBRATING LAVENDER

Becker Vineyards, three miles west of Stonewall and 10 miles east of Fredericksburg and just off U.S. 290, will host the sixth annual Hill Country Lavender Festival 10 a.m.-6 p.m. May 22 and noon-5 p.m. May 23.

Festival activities include demonstrations on the use of lavender, gardening tips, cooking presentations, music, wine tastings and tours. Visitors can purchase plants and lavender products.

Admission is free. Multicourse luncheons both days include food and wine and cost \$50, with reservations required. Call 830-644-2681. More information is at www.beckervineyards.com.

The third annual Lavender Trail also commences May 22-23 and continues for several weekends, depending on blooms. Trail sites include Becker Vineyards, Hill Country Lavender and Lavender Hill in Blanco, Triple L Farms and Trading Post near Fredericksburg and Tank Town near Dripping Springs.

More information, including directions, is on Page 6F.

Caption:

Photos: 1. Meghan Cox, left, and Christina Ivy gather lavender in the fields. Hill Country Lavender near Blanco, one of several stops along a lavender trail, welcomed 16,000 visitors last summer. (color)