

Day Trips

BY GERALD E. MCLEOD

Lavender might some day join wildflowers, peaches, and wine as a signature product of the Texas Hill Country. Of the approximately 300 acres of the fragrant flower planted in the United States, at least 10% of the crop is grown in Texas.

On May 22 and 23, area growers will open their fields to the public for bouquet-picking and special events. The largest concentration of events will be at Becker Vineyards, three miles west of Stonewall, off U.S. 290 on Jenschke Lane, where vendors gather to offer lavender and related products, along with music, wine tastings, and food. The free event is on Saturday, May 22, 10am-6pm, and Sunday, May 23, noon-5pm. For more info, call 830/644-2681 or visit www.beckervineyards.com.

Other participants in the Hill Country Lavender Trail offering cut-your-own lavender include Tank Town, west of Dripping Springs on U.S. 290; Triple L Farms and Trading Post, at 9229 Old San Antonio Rd. west of Fredericksburg; Lavender Hill, on River Run west of Blanco; and Hill Country Lavender, at 1672 McKinney Loop off FM 1623 west of Blanco. An addition to this year's trail is the Lavender Market at 234 W. Main in Fredericksburg, selling an assortment of lavender products.

Central Texans have Richard and Bunny Becker at Becker Vineyards and Jeannie Ralston and Robb Kendrick of Hill Country Lavender to thank for bringing the purple flower bushes to Texas. About the same time, they both noticed how similar the lavender-growing areas of France were to the Hill Country.

Kendrick first got the idea of becoming a lavender farmer while shooting photographs for a magazine article. "It was Robb's idea," says Jeannie Ralston. "He drug me into it kicking and screaming. Now I love it." She also does most of the management of the farm while he is away on assignment as a photographer for National Geographic magazine. Ralston is nervously watching the field in front of her house, hoping the blooms will pop in time for the Lavender Trail.

While this year's cool, damp spring has been wonderful for humans, the short bushes that look like green pincushions prefer hot, dry weather. Hill Country Lavender doesn't use fertilizers or pesticides on the certified organic field. "It doesn't like to be babied," Ralston says. "It's my kind of plant."

That doesn't mean that the lavender crop in Texas hasn't seen its share of problems. Ralston's field still shows signs of damage caused by heavy rains in July 2001 that kept the plants damp too long. Occasionally grasshoppers will be a problem, too. Right after they first planted the 4.5-acre plot, for two years in a row a late freeze that decimated Gillespie County's peach crop also nipped the lavender buds. Although a little slow to flower, this year's crop is looking nice and healthy, Ralston says.

With a wealth of knowledge gained over the last five years, the couple has turned a considerable amount of their energies to helping others become lavender farmers. They offer seminars on growing lavender commercially, and a book they wrote about growing lavender is one of the most requested items from their Web site.

But a lavender field isn't much more than a pretty green and purple garden without a market for the product. Last fall Ralston and Kendrick did a successful trial run of a trailer-mounted distillation plant built by her father and brother. Father and son are both chemical engineers and couldn't resist the challenge of figuring out how to turn the cut lavender leaves and blooms into an essential oil. The distillery also gives local farmers another

market for their crop besides the seasonal pick-your-own trade.

This year Ralston has also added a store at the farm to sell more than 40 different lavender products, ranging from straw hats decorated with lavender plants painted by a man in Haiti to scented oils, water, candles, and soaps. Hill Country Lavender opens for visitors willing to cut their own bundles of blooms on Saturdays and Sundays from 9am to 4pm through late June, when the crop is harvested to make oils. If the plants cooperate, the field might produce a second harvest in October. The store stays open on weekends from July through the Christmas season, 10am-4pm. For more information, call 830/833-5008 or visit www.hillcountrylavender.com.