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## A LAVENDER LIFE

Globe-trotting journalists cultivate a modern fairy tale on a Texas Hill Country farm

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### Article Text:

Robb Kendrick and his young family awaken to lavender fields striped with purple and to air flavored with pungent sweetness. They're not living the good life in Provence as expats, but the labor-intensive existence of lavender farmers in high season, an hour southwest of Austin. The Texas Hill Country isn't known as the apex of lavender production, but wait a few years. Already there are seven or eight young lavender farms with planted crops, and several more are in the planning stages. After Mr. Kendrick, a National Geographic photographer and native Texan, spent a month in Provence, historically the world's lavender producer, documenting the perfume industry and living amongst the lavender fields, he thought, why not have a lavender farm of my own?

He and his wife, Jeannie Ralston, lived in the Texas Hill Country, near Blanco. Three years earlier, they had converted a hay loft and field hands' quarters on 226 acres into a photogenic family house. Their fields were rented to farmers who grew hay. But the alkaline, well-draining soil, hot summers, moderate winters and 30 or so inches of annual rainfall reminded Mr. Kendrick of the south of France. As he photographed the Provençal farmers, he questioned them in detail about their crop, and that was about the extent of his research. Before Ms. Ralston knew it, her husband had ordered 2,000 plants of *Lavandula x intermedia* 'Provence,' evicted the hay farmer and called in friends from Austin to help with a marathon planting session.

"I was against it because Robb travels so much," says Ms. Ralston, a Tennessean who worked 10 years in New York as a magazine writer. "It would be one more thing I would have to deal with while he was away. I'm not a plant person. I wouldn't call myself a gardener, by any stretch."

Nevertheless, while the ragtag crew tucked young plants into rows of tilled earth, Ms. Ralston tended to their toddler and newborn and fed the volunteer hands. The very next spring, her husband ordered an additional 10,000 lavender plants.

As Ms. Ralston delicately points out: "Robb likes to keep challenging himself."

To hear Ms. Ralston's version, there was no plan for the crop that would materialize once the established plants bloomed. In spring 2001, the 2-year-old silvery-green mounds began throwing up spikes of purple flowers and, as Ms. Ralston had predicted, "Robb was getting ready to go on assignment."

Ms. Ralston cut buckets and buckets of the long-stemmed flowers, hauling them to Austin and San Antonio grocers to sell by the bundle. "At that point, we thought we'd be in the fresh-flower business," she says.

But "I cut and cut and cut and didn't make a dent in the field. What were we going to do with all this lavender?"

All I wanted to do was be in the middle of it, just to absorb all those sensations - the smell, the sight, the sound of the bees and the wind. It's just glorious. It was too beautiful to keep to ourselves."

Since then, the couple has crafted a business, expanded year by year, that epitomizes agri-tourism. During the blooming season, Hill Country Lavender is open on weekends as a cut-your-own destination.

### Business scents

The new gift shop, built of local limestone, is stocked with the gamut of lavender products: dried florets for make-your-own sachets and potpourri, soaps, home fragrances, personal care products, live plants, note cards, dried bundles for scenting home fires, hand-painted sun hats, flower buckets, distilled oils, even an herbal mix for repelling scorpions (ah, life in the country).

Their two winsome blond-haired boys, now 7 and 5, sell lavender lemonade for \$2 a glass ("I made \$140 on Saturday," Gus, the elder, announces. "I'm saving up to go swimming with the dolphins and sea lions at Sea World when I'm 8.")

Online sales and distilling their own lavender oil, a start-up shared with Ms. Ralston's father and brother, both chemical engineers, will help convert the business into a year-round enterprise. The entrepreneurs currently are testing the oil yield of other lavender varieties on plots in Mason County, including *L. x dentata* 'Goodwin Creek Grey', *L. x intermedia* 'Grosso', *L. heterophylla* 'Sweet Lavender' and *L. multifida* 'Fernleaf'.

"There's a huge market for lavender oil, but a lot of it is imported from France," says Ms. Ralston. Depending on which variety is harvested, the oil is sweet (preferable for bath oils and home fragrances) or aromatic with camphor (good for clearing the sinuses).

The couple also has produced a book for lavender-farm wannabes. Far from quashing competition in the region, they welcome it. Each entrepreneur puts his or her own twist on the business, and the couple has learned that tourists want to immerse themselves in both the subject of lavender and the Hill Country lifestyle.

### Old-time flavor

Although the region is attracting the kind of people who once built second homes in Santa Fe and Vail, the area retains its original identity. Town squares are still dusty (although they may host a few quaint antique shops), ranching is the local industry, a vaguely-German Texas accent is heard and the views are still of craggy limestone outcroppings, knotted live oaks, wildflower meadows and distant purpled hills.

"It's a layered life," says Ms. Ralston. "Good food, good wine, good friends, good views - and living day to day knowing you're somewhere special."

Ms. Ralston, 43, and Mr. Kendrick, 41, having bought into it themselves, recognize the Hill Country's allure to urbanites. "I think we have the best of both worlds," explains Ms. Ralston. "It's still a very authentic working ranch town. There are a lot of newcomers, but there are still a lot of people who have lived here all their lives.

"Everybody has their own point of view, but we all love this land. That's the unifying force here."

Aside from a local girl Friday who keeps everything on track during summers home from college, the Ralston-Kendricks run the farm pretty much by themselves. Ms. Ralston has thrown over her assignments at Allure magazine ("I hardly ever wear makeup anymore," she says ruefully) for Parenting, Ladies Home Journal and Travel & Leisure.

Their house is a 1941 limestone barn converted into a light- and breeze-filled home that feels contemporary, with its soaring ceilings, rough beams, metal roof and open floor plan. The couple collected architectural salvage, primarily notched and painted doors from Mexico, to incorporate into the easygoing interiors. Ranch-style furnishings are both fitting and practical, with dogs, cats and two boisterous boys in the house.

### Blending new and old

Austin architect Robert Jackson masterminded the adaptation and designed a two-story addition that contains the office from which they run the farm and their continuing freelance careers. The addition is connected to the original structure, made from fieldstone quarried on the site, by a two-story screened enclosure and industrial steel catwalks. Family living space and the boys' bedrooms are upstairs in the original hayloft; the master bedroom is downstairs, insulated within 13-inch-thick stone walls.

A grand outdoor fireplace on the ground floor is a gathering spot for guests in summer and winter. What essentially is a monumental screened porch is also an entry, a party room, playroom and conservatory for hardy plants.

Accordionlike glass doors seal off the upstairs family area when air conditioning is necessary. But with the massive screened area, the compound "works like an old dogtrot," says Mr. Jackson. "The wind and air blow right through. Last year, I think they turned on the central air two days."

Sensitive to water conservation, a longtime Austin hot button, the couple have not dug wells to supply their water needs. Instead, the family catches rainwater in gutters connected to an underground system that feeds into tanks holding 55,000 gallons. After it's filtered three times and zapped with ultraviolet light, the family drinks it, bathes in it, washes dishes with it.

"Full storage tanks will last us 10 months without rain," says Mr. Kendrick.

In addition, the couple vow not to irrigate the lavender crop (nor do they fertilize it). "We're so water-conscious," says Ms. Ralston. "If it's going to make it, it has to make it on its own."

"I've been to 78 countries for Geographic," Mr. Kendrick says. "You see these developing countries going through an industrial revolution. They take and abuse their natural resources and their people to make this great leap. England did it; we did it. We really can't control anything other than what's on our own land. Show our kids. Share with other people in small ways."

Sharing, after all, is what brought about the cut-your-own enterprise that just keeps growing.

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### RESOURCES

Hill Country Lavender in Blanco, a four- to five-hour drive from Dallas, is open weekends through Christmas. Pick-your-own bundles, \$4 a bunch, may be available until mid-July, depending on weather. To check on field conditions, call 830-833-2294 or see [www.hillcountrylavender.com](http://www.hillcountrylavender.com).

Robert Jackson & Michael McElhaney Architects, Austin. 512-472-5132

Tank Town (rainwater collection systems and supplies), Dripping Springs, TX. 512-894-0861 or [www.rainwatercollection.com](http://www.rainwatercollection.com)

## Grow your own

It's not our searing heat, a late freeze or pests that kill lavender, a hardy perennial that can flourish for up to 25 years. We city folk drown it.

If you live on the tail end of the White Rock Escarpment, as in Oak Cliff or southwest Dallas County, you have the alkaline, rocky soil similar to the Texas Hill Country and Provence. If, on the other hand, your soil is dense, heavy black clay, you'll have to work in plenty of composted material to improve drainage. Or plant it in a container filled with a potting medium formulated for cacti and succulents.

Don't plant lavender in a bed watered by an automatic sprinkler. Plant it against a brick, stone or stucco wall or along a concrete drive. Where other flowering plants will broil come July, lavender thrives in the reflected heat.

There are more than 25 varieties of lavender to choose from, the differences being flower color and shape or the cut of the leaf. The owners of Hill Country Lavender in Blanco have had great success growing 'Provence' lavender, the same variety widely grown in Provence, France, for the perfume industry.

'Provence' is long-stemmed, making it ideal for fresh-flower arrangements. When the stem dries, the flowers shatter easily. That's good if you want to make potpourri but bad for wreaths and dried bouquets. If it's a dried bloom you're after, try *Lavandula angustifolia* 'Buena Vista'. Robb Kendrick recommends planting lavender in October, so roots can get established as days are getting shorter and cooler.

Before the first frost, Mr. Kendrick cuts back his mounded, 3-foot plants by one-third. When spring arrives, be patient. Lavender is teased into bloom by direct sun and warm temperatures.

### Caption:

PHOTO(S): (1. - 4. Photos by NATALIE CAUDILL/Staff Photographer) 1. Robb Kendrick and Jeannie Ralston wanted to raise their sons where they could climb trees, run through wildflower meadows and see the stars. The Hill Country farmstead offers that and more. 2. A compact gift shop stocks all things lavender. The shop is open weekends through Christmas or via [hillcountrylavender.com](http://hillcountrylavender.com). 3. Adapting barn into house and connecting separate buildings by an open-air catwalk was assigned to Austin architect Robert Jackson, who accrued state and local awards for the project. 4. What used to be a barn is now a multipurpose living area at Hill Country Lavender.