

A family changes the fragrance of rural Texas with lavender crop.

From:

San Antonio Express-News (San Antonio, TX)

Date:

July 28, 2004

Byline: L.A. Lorek

Jul. 28--BLANCO, Texas -- In a land where cattle and cotton once dominated the agriculture scene, a fragrant purple flower from France has taken root and spawned a sweet-smelling industry in Texas.

Robb Kendrick, 41, and his wife, Jeannie Ralston, 43, founded Hill Country Lavender six years ago and have since become the state's chief experts in lavender production and marketing.

It all came about after a trip to the south of France.

During an assignment on perfume-making around the world, Kendrick, a photographer for National Geographic, came up with the idea of planting lavender in Texas. The climate, soil, topography and other conditions in Provence, France, which has abundant fields of lavender, matched the Hill Country terrain.

"If it grows there, maybe it'll grow here," he said, noting lavender needs a sloping terrain, high temperatures and little water to thrive.

Upon his return, Kendrick and Ralston converted a 4 1/2-acre field in front of their house to lavender intermedia, the same variety that grows in Provence. The flowers are popular for their fragrance, though there are also medical and culinary uses.

In May 2001, the first crop came in. Kendrick took a bunch of fresh-cut lavender to Central Market in Austin and asked to speak with the store's buyer. The store agreed to take as much as he could supply. That first year, the couple had a net profit of \$4,800.

Today, Hill Country Lavender has more than 10,000 plants. Ralston and Kendrick, along with their two tow-headed sons, Gus, 7, and Jeb, 5, promote agricultural tourism on their farm.

Tourists pick their own lavender for \$4 a bunch on weekends during the season from May until late July. Gus and Jeb run a stand hawking lavender lemonade for \$2 a cup. On special occasions, such as Mother's Day, the couple sell box lunches for picnics under a 300-year-old oak tree near the lavender field.

Visits to Hill Country Lavender soared from 300 people its first year to more than 16,000 during the seven weekends it was open last year. The farm also received a marketing grant from the Texas Department of Agriculture to promote tourism.

"This is a tremendous niche market," said Beverly Boyd, spokeswoman for the Agriculture Department.

In three decades, Texas farmers have diversified their crops away from the bulk commodities of corn, cotton

and sorghum to grapes, blueberries, Christmas trees, olive trees and other unusual harvests such as lavender. In the process, agricultural tourism has also become a booming business. Many farms also run bed-and-breakfast inns and offer pick-your-own produce, tours, mazes and hiking.

Tourists spent \$2.34 billion in rural Texas during 2002, up 20 percent from a year earlier, according to the Agriculture Department.

“We are now the fifth-largest wine-producing state in the nation,” Boyd said. “Whether we become the giant lavender producer of the United States, who is to know?” Hill Country Lavender also runs a thriving lavender store. Last year, the couple hauled all their wares out every weekend for sale under a canopy. This year, they built a beautiful limestone addition to their shed house completely stocked with 62 lavender-laced products, including scented pencils and cookbooks.

Ralston taps local resources to make products from lavender grown on the farm. In San Antonio, a friend creates soy candles that retail for \$9. In Austin, another friend produces six varieties of lavender soaps that sell for \$5 each. An artist in Haiti makes cut straw hats painted with lavender flowers that sell for \$12.

That’s just the tip of their lavender empire. Ralston and Kendrick have just launched another venture, Texas Essential Oils. Ralston’s father and brother, both chemical engineers, designed and built a portable distillery unit to extract lavender oil from the plants.

The couple has sowed another 10,000 plants of several varieties of lavender on land they bought in Mason, about 40 miles north of Fredericksburg. They plan to harvest them to make lavender oil, which people use as a skin softener and for perfumed baths, among other things.

Hill Country Lavender has also become a setting for teaching other aspiring lavender entrepreneurs. Ralston and Kendrick have taught several sessions on how to grow, harvest and market lavender. People have come from Ohio, Kentucky, New Mexico, Colorado and Vermont to attend. They also wrote a booklet, which sells for \$35 on their Web site, [www.hillcountrylavender.com](http://www.hillcountrylavender.com).

“A lot of people ask us, how much can you make?” Ralston said. “I say, how hard do you want to work? It’s a lot of hard work.” Already, 10 farms in Texas have started planting lavender, including Becker Vineyards outside Fredericksburg and Tank Town in Dripping Springs, according to the Agriculture Department. Each May, a Lavender Trail through the Hill Country links the farms.

Despite their success so far, Kendrick and Ralston, a freelance writer, don’t plan to retire and live off the lavender just yet.

“It’s definitely not at the point where we could quit our day jobs,” Kendrick said.

Last year, Ralston said, Hill Country Lavender had a net profit of \$55,000.

“This started out as my brainchild,” Kendrick said. “It’s good supplemental income.” For Ralston and Kendrick, the sweet smell of success continues to grow in their front yard with rows and rows of lavender.

And they plan to continue harvesting it.