

## Lavender Love

Blanco Celebrates its essence with a brand-new festival  
BY VIRGINIA B. WOOD

The Texas Hill Country resembles countries surrounding the Mediterranean more all the time. First, area wineries began experimenting with warm weather grape varietals from the South of France, Italy, and Spain, and then a few brave souls invested in olive groves. Just now, the hills are coming alive with the brilliant color and distinctive fragrance of lavender. The woody evergreen shrub native to the Mediterranean has been cultivated since antiquity for both its medicinal and culinary properties. Lavender flourishes in alkaline soil with plenty of sunshine and limited rain, making it right at home in the rocky limestone soil west of the Balcones Fault. On assignment for National Geographic, photographer Robb Kendrick noticed the geographic similarities between the Provençal countryside and his 200-acre Blanco-area spread. He did some research on lavender varietals with French experts and returned home to experiment with several different types before discovering that *lavandula intermedia* (Provence lavender) was best suited to the Blanco area.

Kendrick and his wife Jeannie Ralston started with 2,000 lavender plants on their Blanco acres in 1999 and had crops in full bloom by 2001. That garden is now open seasonally for public tours and demonstrations. They've since installed another 8,000 plants on acreage they own in Mason County for full-scale commercial production. Kendrick and Ralston's initial experiment has grown from a "quirky little sideline" business into something much more. In addition to selling blooms to stores and florists in Austin and San Antonio, the owners of Hill Country Lavender invite the public to cut their own lavender during the late spring season, offer craft demonstrations and cooking classes, extract essential oil, create and sell a line of body care and aromatherapy products, and give regular seminars on lavender farming to interested growers from all over.

"People ask us if we worry about training the competition," Ralston says, "but we're really excited about seeing this area become known for lavender." Indeed, there are now eight active lavender farms in various stages of production in the greater Blanco area, with more in the offing. Lavender promises to be both a healthy, reliable cash crop and a legitimate agritourism attraction for the Hill Country.

With lavender in full bloom, the community of Blanco has fully embraced the new industry, referring to itself as the "Lavender Capital of Texas" and scheduling the first Blanco Lavender Festival on May 21 and 22 with enthusiastic sponsorship from local businesses and a Texas Yes! grant from the Texas Department of Agriculture. Everything in Blanco from the historic courthouse grounds to watering cans to gourmet food items will be sporting some version of lavender that weekend, and the entire state is invited. Many of the scheduled events and tours of the various farms are free, but some meals and classes will require reservations and/or payments. Wear comfortable clothes, plenty of sunscreen, and tote your own shears for cutting lavender. The entire festival schedule, plus a map of the area, is available online at [www.blancolavenderfestival.com](http://www.blancolavenderfestival.com) or by calling the Greater Blanco Chamber of Commerce weekday mornings at 830/833-5101.

The eight farms on the festival tour are within about 30 minutes' drive time from one another, making it possible to visit all of them in one day. Each property offers a unique atmosphere, signature product line, or creative slate of activities planned for guests.

For a larger map click [here](#)

- 1) Heron's Nest Herb Farm (830/833-2627): Fred and Melanie Van Aken are serious students of herbal remedies. They've arranged a craft vendor's market, herb and bird walks, and salve-making and permaculture classes.
- 2) Hill Country Lavender (830/833-2294, [www.hillcountrylavender.com](http://www.hillcountrylavender.com)): Robb Kendrick and Jeannie Ralston will offer classes in lavender crafts, cooking, aromatherapy, and wand-making in addition to luncheons both days. Reservations necessary.
- 3) Hill Country Organics (830/833-5378, [lhc@moment.net](mailto:lhc@moment.net)): Several sizes of lavender bushes for sale, plus cut-your-own bunches. Bring your own shears. Arrange to have pictures taken with Longhorn cattle.
- 4) Hummingbird Farms (512/868-7862): Jack and Debbie Williams have been growing six varieties of lavender since 2003. Experience the beginning of their lavender adventure with lavender products and plants.
- 5) Lavender and Longhorns Farm (830/833-1595): Enjoy a refreshing glass of lavender lemonade and some delicious baked goodies as you explore the new lavender labyrinth here.
- 6) Lavender Hill (830/833-9097, [www.lavenderhilltx.com](http://www.lavenderhilltx.com)): Observe the extraction of essential lavender oil by the distillation process and purchase various lavender products in the gift shop. International lavender expert Sharon Shipley will conduct cooking demonstrations and sign books in the kitchen both days. It is necessary to purchase tickets to the cooking demonstrations. Hosts Ganell and Charley Pemberton will provide live music.
- 7) Lonestar Lavender (830/833-1317): This working Longhorn cattle ranch boasts a relatively new and lovely lavender oasis at its center. Ranchers Randy and Pat Barney will be selling an old-fashioned hot dog picnic to the strains of country music.
- 8) Texas Lavender Hills Farm & Market (830/833-9183, [www.texaslavenderhills.com](http://www.texaslavenderhills.com)): Discover a spectacular view of the Hill Country and shop for such lavender-themed items as T-shirts, toddler/infant wear, and tote bags.