

## Wildflower Road Trip through the Texas Hill Country

By Susan Camp

Last Friday, we arrived home from a trip to Houston, Texas to visit our son and granddaughter. April is a good time to travel in East Texas. The heat and humidity have not yet arrived, and the native wildflowers are beginning to put on their annual extravaganza. We have heard for years about the springtime wildflower show in the gently rolling Texas Hill Country, and this year we decided to see it for ourselves. We were a little early for the main event, but bluebonnets, poppies, Indian paintbrush and other natives were blooming in the fields and along the roadsides, especially near Fredericksburg in Gillespie County.

Fredericksburg, a pleasant town founded by German farmers in the 1840's maintains its mix of Western town/European village ambiance with signs advertising "saloon" as well as "gasthaus" and "biergarten." Many street and family names are German. The citizens are proud of their town and eager to share the history of their hard-working ancestors who cultivated the rich Hill Country soil. Today the region is famous not only for its wildflower season, but for dozens of successful wineries and several distilleries. The largest wildflower seed farm in the United States is located in Fredericksburg. Two hundred acres of bluebonnets, poppies, and other wildflowers were in bloom, providing a dazzling display of color.

The best-known residents of Texas hill Country were Lyndon Baines and Lady Bird Johnson. The Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park is maintained by the National Park Service and the LBJ Ranch lies along the beautiful Pedernales River.

As First Lady, Lady Bird Johnson assumed an active role, working with various groups to plant cherry trees and millions of flowers in Washington, DC. Mrs. Johnson hired a press secretary and a liaison with Congress to help promote the passage of the Highway Beautification Act of 1965, which limited billboards and junkyards and provided funding to sow wildflower and native grass seeds along the nation's federal highways. The act often is called "Lady Bird's Bill." Amendments later weakened the bill to favor the billboard industry, but Mrs. Johnson is remembered as the First Lady who made Americans aware of protecting and stewarding the environment.

After Leaving Washington, DC, Mrs. Johnson continued to work in her home state to enhance the beauty of the roadsides for the enjoyment of citizens and tourists. Today her contributions to conservation and highway beautification are honored by the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center at the University of Texas in Austin. Research at the Wildflower Center in the 21<sup>st</sup> century focuses on conservation of native plants and monitoring of invasive species and research and design of healthy ecosystems.

Although the act provided for improvement of the roadsides of federal highways, Master Gardeners and garden club and civic organization members in communities across the country work together to beautify the roads in their towns, cities, and counties. We noticed signs in the medians in several Texas towns proclaiming new wildflower seeding projects.

Cleanup of roadsides and ditches is the first step toward beautification. A community with plastic bag and trash-filled ditches; derelict buildings and signs; and junk cars visible from its roads won't attract visitors and new businesses. We saw very little trash along the roadsides in the Hill Country; of course, the area is famous for its spring wildflowers, but I suspect community pride makes the citizens think twice before tossing plastic bags or Styrofoam cups out of car windows.

Gloucester Courthouse looks lovely every spring, with thousands of daffodils showing their cheerful faces, and some of the medians in mid-county have attractive plantings, as do some of the businesses in the lower county. Redbud is in bloom right now, and I think it is the prettiest spring flowering tree. Still, I sometimes find myself dreaming of ways to beautify the Route 17 medians. I would love to see them filled with varieties of native wildflowers and grasses that would bloom from spring through fall.

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