

# INFULLBLOOM

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When you're contemplating glorious wildflowers, January doesn't usually come to mind. The spring months of March through May garner all the glory, as they showcase the beauty of the Hill Country with the gorgeous reds, blues, oranges, and yellows of nature's floral display. But those other nine months, including January, afford great opportunities to learn about land conservation, native landscaping, horticulture, and environmental education at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, where landscape restoration, plant conservation, horticulture, and education has been the priority since 1982.

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The Wildflower Center, a native-plant botanical garden founded in the early 1980s by Lady Bird Johnson and the late actress Helen Hayes, was established to protect and preserve North America's native plants and natural landscapes. It honors and respects the natural beauty and heritage of each region of the country and promotes the use of native wildflowers, plants, and landscapes. The 279-acre facility began as the National Wildflower Research Center, on a small plot of undeveloped land east of Austin; it was renamed the Lady Bird Wildflower Center in 1998.

Maintaining defined landscapes that differentiate one part of the United States from another is an important concept to the former first lady; this is the reason the center emphasizes the use of native plants through plant conservation. In Texas, more than 200 native plant species are at risk, and 28 of those species are listed as threatened or endangered.

"Lady Bird wanted Texas to look like Texas, and New England to look like New England," said the center's executive director, Susan Rieff. "Native plants help to define the look and feel of an area and keep Central Texas from looking like Anywhere, USA. We advocate for native plants for many reasons, including sustainability, adaptability, and survivability. Texas ash, pecan, cypress, Texas mountain laurel,

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**facing page** when leander isd heard of wish kid kaycee's wish to redecorate her room, the school district raised funds and provided volunteers to fulfill it.





**this page** president and ceo of make-a-wish foundation tammy shaklee (center) and two ut interns stuff wish presentation sacks with icebreaker gifts that volunteers use to interview new wish children. **facing page**

and lantana can endure our dry summers, mild winters, and erratic rainfalls. They require less maintenance and help restore a sense of balance to our ecosystem.”

Other native plants that the center encourages are yellow bells, big muhly, and Mexican feather grass, according to Carrie McDonald, a fellow gardener and the Wildflower Center volunteer services manager.

“It is vital that people use plants native to our specific bioregion,” she said. “Texas ecology promotes using salvias, white mist flowers, and twist leaf yucca succulents. Our goal is to teach visitors what makes native plants thrive and their role in our environment.”

The Wildflower Center serves a broad-based audience, ranging from those who simply love the beauty of flowers to avid gardeners who are interested in the scientific aspects of horticulture. The center’s various

programs include landscape restoration, horticulture, and education.

“As part of land restoration, we work to heal damaged and degraded land systems back to their natural state,” said Rieff. “We worked with Advanced Micro Devices to provide advice for making their move a more ecologically sound one. We also consulted with the Town Lake Trail Foundation to help restore portions of the trail where invasive trees and poison ivy had taken over.”

The horticultural aspect of the center involves managing the gardens and nursery operations. Here botanists demonstrate different styles of landscaping with designs appropriate to local plant communities.

“Since 1995, the number of plant species has grown from 200 to over 600,” said Rieff. “Our gardens are a living collection complete with detailed records and herbarium

samples on all plant acquisitions.”

Education is an integral ingredient in the Wildflower Center. As part of its continuing native plant education series, the center is offering free admission to the public in January, as well as a chance to learn how to identify and maintain 30 species of native trees in the “Tree Talk, Winter Walk: Barking Up the Right Tree” class, scheduled for January 27, 2007. The center has recently become part of the University of Texas, and patrons are invited to participate in the Texas Union Informal Classes, Go Native U. The program, starting in the spring of 2007, is designed to teach gardeners of all skill levels to become certified plant gardeners. Upcoming courses include planting a native garden, native plant selection, native garden installation, native garden maintenance, and pests 101.

With so many valuable programs available

**“SINCE 1995, THE NUMBER OF PLANT SPECIES HAS GROWN FROM 200 TO OVER 600, OUR GARDENS ARE A LIVING COLLECTION COMPLETE WITH DETAILED RECORDS AND HERBARIUM SAMPLES ON ALL PLANT ACQUISITIONS.” — SUSAN RIEFF**

at the Wildflower Center, the 50-person staff relies heavily on its volunteers. “We have at least 400 volunteers who keep everything running,” said Rieff. “Each volunteer brings an important talent to the center. Some maintain our extensive online plant database, others press plants, and others manage the store. We absolutely could not function without them.” Marie Bassett became a Wildflower Center volunteer in 1995 and has since logged more than 1,800 hours of service at one of her favorite places. “My husband retired and we moved to Austin in 1993,” she said. “I am a Scottish farmer’s daughter who loves the countryside; I still have a wildflower book that my uncle gave me when I was seven years old. I became more interested in conservation and native plants, and the Wildflower Center was the perfect match for me.”

Bassett completed a two-part learning program, which combines eight weeks (48 hours) of classroom and field study with eight weeks (24 hours) of self-scheduled experiential learning. Docent training is offered annually, beginning in early January. Some docent duties include leading adult tours, assisting with family programming, and participating in special events and festivals. During Bassett’s training, she learned about gardening and the geology of Central Texas, problems with the Edwards Aquifer, the climate of Texas, how to

identify plants and soil types, and history and folklore.

“During my docent training, I was lucky enough to see Mrs. Johnson onsite, having her Christmas photo taken,” said Bassett. “She wore a beautiful red dress and looked charming holding some Texas bluebells. She casually mentioned that she had found them lying around on the garden grounds. Lady Bird looked so at ease in the gardens.”

Imparting factoids to tour-goers brings joy to Bassett. “I love bringing little-known facts to the visitors’ attention in order to teach them about our native plants,” she said. “We are not trying to exclude the use of other plants, but want to encourage people to utilize plants that represent their unique environments. I try to uncover tidbits of information that really stick in people’s minds.”

“The Wildflower Center is a wonderful place, where you can learn about much more than the standard bluebonnet,” said Bassett. “It is beautiful year-round and offers so many opportunities to learn about the area and give back to the environment. I am so thankful that Lady Bird Johnson made her dream a reality, and that we are all lucky enough to enjoy the results.” **AC**

*To learn more about the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, call (512) 292-4100 or visit [www.wildflower.org](http://www.wildflower.org).*

