

# Wild Ideas

(Lady Bird Johnson's Wildflower Center)

Lin Sutherland

Onion Creek Ranch

"There are certain spots between here and Blanco (a hill country town 15 miles from Johnson City) that I call my own Monets," says Lady Bird Johnson, who thinks of Texas' abundant wildflowers as Nature's palette. Fiery Indian paintbrush, native phlox, fragrant bluebonnets, brilliant yellow Texas stars, white milk thistle—all are friends to the former First Lady, who grew up roaming the East Texas woods where "dogwood bloomed like lace and wild roses grew along the fences."

Lady Bird can wax poetic when it comes to native flowers, and perhaps that is why, on her seventieth birthday in 1983, she donated the land and money needed to found the National Wildflower Research Center. Based in Austin, it is the only national non-profit organization dedicated to preserving and reestablishing native wildflowers, grasses, vines, shrubs and trees in planned landscapes.

"You should work at projects that make your heart sing," this strong, friendly lady believes.

The Wildflower Center's unique focus on native plants, resource conservation, and ecologically sensitive design reflect Lady Bird's deep concern for the environment. The natural stone buildings, courtyards, gardens and ponds nestle gently into 42 acres of Central Texas Hill Country. Much of the land has been carefully protected or restored, recalling its past glory. Texas-German Mission and Ranch style architecture evokes the region's diverse cultural heritage.

By showcasing the brilliant variety and the economic and ecological benefits of native plants and flowers, the Wildflower Center helps shape the national landscape. With its Information Clearinghouse, it furnishes valuable information to state highway departments, landscape designers, developers, teachers and backyard gardeners.

And of course, it welcomes visitors who just want to come and stroll through the beautiful grounds and discover native plants thriving in natural and formal settings. Some of the center's wonderful places are

- the Hummingbird Garden, where all the flowering plants draw many species of hummingbirds
- the Observation tower and cistern

- the wildflower meadow
- the nature trail
- the seed court and seed silo
- the meditation garden
- the woodlands and oak grove
- the filtration and detention ponds
- the research Liberia
- the visitor's gallery
- the Children's Garden

This last is a favorite for both children and adults. From its miniature door to the scaled down wheelbarrows, spades and wooden work tables, everything in the children's garden is elf-size. Children can spend hours digging and planting, learning from one of the center's 22 staff or numerous volunteers. Like a child at the beach, children never seem to tire of just digging and puttering and getting their hands in dirt.

Wildflowers nurtured Lady Bird Johnson in her childhood. Her mother died when she was five. She says the violets and roses that grew in the woods in which she was raised helped ward off loneliness and remind her of beauty.

Lady Bird's signature when she was First Lady was beautification. The President shared her love of the land. He expanded the national park system and fought vociferously when Congress tried to stall on the 1965 Highway Beautification Act. "You know, I love that woman," he told his cabinet, "and she wants that Highway Beautification Act. By God, we're going to get it for her."

When Congress tried to weaken the bill, Lady Bird went to strategy sessions, something not even Eleanor Roosevelt had done. She was determined, and she won.

When you drive through Texas in the spring, it's roads and highways are ablaze in flowers and shrubs. But perhaps an even greater contribution has been her ability to personalize concepts like beautification, and make them real and living. From the beginning, she knew that growing bluebonnets and paintbrush was a way to let the public know about a larger issue: the great benefits of landscaping with native plants (xeriscaping).

The lawn was a concept inherited from England and made practical in Great Britain because they had a lot of sheep, nature's lawn mowers. But, lawns are mostly composed of foreign grasses—Bermuda, St. Augustine, and Zoysia, to name a few—that require a great amount of watering and fertilizing to stay healthy. By contrast, America's western landscape was filled with hearty indigenous plants such as buffalo grass, which once grew wild from Canada to Mexico, and which requires little or no fertilizing and watering.

“Buffalo grass is a wonderful alternative to the thirsty turf lawn,” says Senior Botanist Flo Oxley. “It's hearty, drought-tolerant and beautiful.”

“As we experience problems with lowering water tables and increasing maintenance costs, incorporating nature's bounty into our landscapes may provide a viable alternative in suitable areas to our concept of manicured, clipped grass,” Lady Bird Johnson wrote in her 1982 statement announcing the center.

“Buffalo grass is an example of the versatile native plant early settlers of the West found in America,” adds Oxley. “Settlers relied on these plants for food, clothing and medicine. They gained from them aesthetically, too. There's a lovely passage about a girl crossing in a covered wagon and after a hard day's journey, she goes and sits in a field of blooming wildflowers to soothe her soul.”

“Native plants give people a regional sense of the world,” Oxley says. “We know if we see certain cacti we are looking at the southwest. Eventually and unfortunately, though, regional plants were looked at as something to be conquered because they interfered with crops.”

Lady Bird wants to encourage people to go to their local nurseries and ask about native plants and flowers, to harvest seeds from meadows and grow them at home.

“I just hope we look around us, want to keep the Lord's world as good as we found it, and maybe enhance it and hand it down better.”

---

#### ABOUT THE NATIONAL WILDFLOWER CENTER

The mission of the Wildflower Research Center is to educate people about the environmental necessity, economic value, and natural beauty of native plants. The Wildflower Center serves North America by promoting the preservation and use of native plants through programs, information dissemination and example.

The Wildflower Center has received national recognition and received many awards for its conservation and ecological efforts, including *The Good Steward Award*, *Eagle Award for Excellence and Landscape Design Award*.

Throughout the year, the Center offers special events and exhibits. The Wildflower Days Festival this year will celebrate *The Nature of America*, April 18-19, with guest speaker Jean-Michel Cousteau, son of Jacques Cousteau. The festival will take place at the ward-winning native plant botanical garden, and will offer lectures from plant experts and authors, native plant and seed sales, live music, arts and crafts and dynamic children's activities.

Membership in the Wildflower Center is \$25 a year, and includes free admission, the Wildflower newsletter, advance notice of events and programs, gift store and catalog discounts, and free advice from the center's botanists. The Center offers the public an extensive array of education programs in the form of workshops, adults classes and tours, children's programs and teacher training.

#### **The Wildflower Research Center**

4801 La Crosse Avenue, Austin, TX 78730

Telephone: 512-292-4100

Fax: 512-292-4627

Website: <http://www.wildflower.org>

Open to visitors Tuesday through Sunday. Closed Mondays and major holidays.

### **About the Author**

Lin Sutherland teaches horsemanship and riding at Onion Creek Ranch in Austin, Texas. She rides and writes where the west wind takes her.