



Where Have All the Wildflowers Gone?

by Carol Seminara, HCMG

Wildflowers, by definition, are flowering plants that grow on their own in a wild or natural state. They are uncultivated, able to grow, go to seed and established themselves in a region all without our agricultural assistance. They are beautiful and random, and it's the indeterminate, ephemeral nature of their display that gives wildflowers such a romantic hold on our imaginations.

Texans have enormous affection for our wildflowers in general and bluebonnets in particular, thanks in a great part to the efforts of Lady Bird Johnson, our environmental former First Lady.



Also called Texas lupine, Buffalo clover, Wolf-flower or El Conejo ("The Rabbit," in Spanish), bluebonnets are native, spring-blooming annuals, members of Fabaceae (Pea Family). Tradition has it that the flower was named to reflect its brilliant color and the sunbonnet-shape of its petals.

In 1901 the Texas Legislature adopted *Lupinus subcamosus* as the official state flower of the Lone Star State. Later, in 1971 because there are at least four other species of bluebonnet growing in Texas, that legislation was amended to include *L. texensis* and "any other variety of bluebonnet not heretofore recorded."

We're so crazy about our bonnets of blue that we have an Official Texas State Flower Song – "Bluebonnets," by Julia D. Booth and Lora C. Crockett (so designated by a House Concurrent Resolution in 1933); an Official Bluebonnet Festival – Chappell Hill Bluebonnet Festival; and, so designated in 1989, an Official Texas Bluebonnet Tartan designed by June MacRoberts under the guidance of the official registrar for tartans, the Scottish Tartan Society Museum.

Much has been made about the dearth of bluebonnets decorating our local landscape this spring. The flowers are out there, but not in the multitudes of recent seasons. Two years ago the 11-mile scenic Willow City Loop drive (from Fredericksburg go north on Texas highway 16 heading for Llano then take a right on FM 1323) was awash in so much blue it looked as if the area was dotted with lakes.

My private patch of volunteer bluebonnets is presently up and blooming, although I've noticed the plants are smaller and less vigorous than last year's. A couple plants have already gone to seed. Frequently, early bolting is an indication of a stressed plant that's merely trying to survive to grow another day.

According to a 2/17/09 press release from Damon Waitt, senior botanist from the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, the cause of this paucity of posies is the "exceptional drought in Central Texas." To have a spectacular spring showing of bluebonnets, and their buddies the Indian paintbrush (*Castilleja indivisa* Engelm.), you need a lot of rainfall the previous fall. Our current drought, which is officially classified as "extreme" by the U.S. National Drought Monitor for Texas, is one of the driest 17-month periods on record (beginning 9/01/07, through 1/18/09).

"When rain is sparse in the fall," Waitt said, "fewer wildflowers develop, producing fewer seeds to set the stage for the next season's displays." Therefore, less rain equals few flowers today and fewer flowers tomorrow.

All is not lost. According to Waitt, those of us living in the Hill Country should be able to find some roadside color this year. Pink evening primrose a.k.a. Showy primrose (*Oenothera speciosa*) will benefit from the reduced competition, while members of the sunflower family such as Englemann daisy (*Engelmannia pinnatifida*) are adapted to drier climates and usually succeed in dry years.

Other hardy species that do well in these dry times include Indian blanket (*Gaillardia pulchella*), Mexican hat (*Ratibida columnifera*) and Black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia fulgida*).

If, however, you are entertaining out-of-state visitors or you just need your annual bluebonnet fix, there are a couple of Web sites that detail the latest wildflower sightings.

- [Lone Star Internet](#) features info on what's blooming where from folks out looking for flowers
- [WildflowerHaven Community](#) organizes its sighting posts by region
- [Bluebonnet Cam at the Wildflower Center](#) has a video of a particular bed of bluebonnets every hour. When the bluebonnets are in season it's a virtual flower peeping at its best.