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# TEXAS WILDFLOWERS



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# Bluebonnet

The beauty of wildflowers is a joy in its own right, but the little-known folklore behind spring bloomers adds extra sparkle to the spectacle. “People talked about trees and shrubs because they were useful—they had fruits and purposes as medicines,” explains Matt Turner, author of *Remarkable Plants of Texas*. “But annual wildflowers, while they were pretty, were talked about as a ‘kaleidoscope of colors,’ filling prairies as far as the eye could see; they didn’t talk about individual flowers.”

The Texas bluebonnet is one exception, singled out from the floral tapestry in folklore, perhaps because it tends to be one of the first colorful flowers to appear each spring. One of the better-known legends tells the tale of a Comanche tribe suffering after a bitter winter. The medicine men knew they would have to sacrifice their most prized possession to appease The Great Spirit: overhearing their conversation, a young girl decided she must sacrifice hers—a little doll adorned with blue jay feathers. After everyone went to sleep, she burned the doll and scattered its ashes in the wind, and the tribe awoke the next morning to see the hillsides blanketed in blue.

Our state flower is known for its bright blue hue, described by some as “when the sky falls on Texas,” but horticulturists like Jerry Parsons, a retired Texas A&M University professor from San Antonio, have been researching and developing variants of the bluebonnet’s color for decades—“I’ve been fooling around with them for more than 40 years,” Parsons says.

Parsons is perhaps best known for developing a maroon variety of the flower in honor of his alma mater. “In nature, especially when you’re dealing with blue flowers, you’ll always have a white variant—the absence of color—and a light pink variant,” he explains. Parsons and his research team saved the seeds from pure pink and pure blue

flowers, crossing them each year until they turned the perfect shade of red.

One of Parsons’ former students, Greg Grant, a horticulturist and plant developer for Texas A&M in Tyler, related a Mexican legend he had been told by an elderly Hispanic woman—paraphrased below—about the legend of the pink bluebonnet:

*One April many years ago, two children were playing in a field of wildflowers with their grandmother near San Antonio. Upon finding a white flower among the blue, the grandmother explained to her excited grandchildren that they were playing in a field of bluebonnets, and on rare occasions a white one is among them. “Some even say the Lone Star of the Texas state flag was fashioned after a spot of white bluebonnets among a field of blue,” she said.*

*“Then what about this pink one?” one child asked, pointing to a flower at his feet. The grandmother paused. “When I myself was a little girl, my grandmother told me a special story about these rare flowers. They seem to only grow downstream from the mission Alamo, and that is because of something that happened here many years ago.” She went on to tell of how their ancestors once owned a beautiful house and farm before Santa Anna’s army overtook the Texans in the bloody battle of the Alamo. Heartbroken but thankful their lives had been spared, the grandmother, then a child, witnessed her mother place a pink wildflower in a vase beside the statue of the Virgin Mary. “She told me she had found it near the river where it had once been white, but so much blood had been shed, it had taken the tint of it.”*

*After relaying her grandmother’s story to her own grandchildren, she stopped to explain the meaning she had given the rare flower. “That is why you will only find the pink ones near the river, within sight of the old mission,” she said. “So remember, the next time you see a pink bluebonnet, it’s not only a pretty flower, but a symbol for the struggle to survive and of those who died so that Texas could be free.”*

Whether or not this legend is true, Parsons and Grant agree that the only place they have found those rare pink bluebonnets in the wild is along the road just south of San Antonio.

**FIELD NOTES:** From the Louisiana border to the mountains of West Texas, from the Red River to the Rio Grande—Texas’ six native bluebonnet species can be found throughout most of the state. They’re easiest to find along roadsides, in the Blackland Prairie, and in the Edwards Plateau. The Willow City Loop near Fredericksburg is a favorite drive.

*Left: Some say the Lone Star of the Texas state flag was fashioned after a spot of white bluebonnets among a field of blue.*





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*Each spring, when bluebonnet fields are abundant in the Texas Hill Country, so are the sightseers. Experts at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center in Austin say the season came early this year and may be spread out over several months rather than a rush during March and April.*

