

From a Sea of Blue

Story by: Caitlin Powers '14

Highway 6 and Farm to Market roads 30 and 21 pave the way to Aggieland and are sure to be lined with a sea of blue during the spring. As the state flower of Texas, bluebonnets make themselves known to all by their many clusters all across the state. Only in Aggieland would the thought to transform the sea of blue into a sea of maroon derive.

Aggies can show their Texas pride and bleed maroon at the same time thanks to Greg Grant '84 and Jerry Parsons, Ph.D. They worked to create the Aggie maroon bluebonnet, now called Alamo Fire, while working at the Texas Research and Extension Station in San Antonio, Texas. Surprisingly, the pair did not originally set out to create a maroon bluebonnet—it was serendipitous.

Parsons first sought to create a Texas flag made entirely of bluebonnets. Celebrating the Texas Sesquicentennial in 1986 was a big deal for San Antonio, home of the Alamo. The idea of a Texas flag crafted completely of bluebonnets at the San Antonio Botanical Garden was put into place to celebrate 150 years of the Lone Star state. In order to do this, white and red bluebonnets had to be produced.

“When we first started the project, I said we need red, white and blue, and we already have the blue,” Parsons said. “All we needed was two more colors and people had seen white.”

Parsons' first task was to isolate the white strain of bluebonnet that was somewhat common. Seeds were collected from the white bluebonnets, and within two years he had a white bluebonnet seed that he began to stabilize and isolate.

“When Grant saw that maroon bluebonnet, he fell out of the truck humming the Aggie War Hymn.”

-Jerry Parsons, Ph.D.

“We had two-thirds of the project accomplished in four years,” Parsons said. “The other part we were looking for, the red, took a little bit longer.”

The creation of the red bluebonnets would take almost 20 years. The closest to red were the pink bluebonnets and would be what the red bluebonnets would be created from. Pink bluebonnet seeds were collected and planted in hopes of finding darker pink bluebonnets to get a few red bluebonnets.

“Grant came into the picture during this time and was the first to notice the unique color combination in the pink bluebonnets,” Parsons said. While Grant and Parsons

worked to find the red bluebonnets, they found some pink bluebonnets with a tinge of blue. Grant, being the good Ag he is, thought the blue-tinged pink bluebonnets looked a lot like the color maroon.

“When Grant saw that maroon bluebonnet, he fell out of the truck humming the Aggie war hymn,” Parsons said. “It was a magical moment in Grant's life.”

The idea was then born to select seeds not for red, but for maroon. Parsons said it was Grant who originated the idea and that bluebonnets could be selected for the color maroon. The project would take nearly 10 years before they even got a shade of maroon.

“We had to isolate the pink, the light pink and the dark pink before we could see the maroon,” Parsons said.

Grant and Parsons began to do so with the help of local farmers in the surrounding San Antonio area. Parsons said the farmers would grow, water and fertilize the seed to achieve a crop of the pink with the tinge of blue, then a darker pink and finally the maroon bluebonnet.



to Deep Maroon

The next step for Parsons would be sustaining the maroon bluebonnet through the maintenance of the seed supply.

"If we didn't have somebody who was willing to take it on, grow it as a special project and package it, there would be no more maroon bluebonnets," Parsons said.

Parsons approached John Thomas at Wildseed Farms Inc., to provide assistance. Thomas had been growing wildflowers for nearly 10 years in Eagle Lake, Texas. Since Thomas was already established in producing wildflower seeds, he was a perfect candidate to grow and market the maroon bluebonnet seed.

"It added another dimension to our business," Thomas said. "Who doesn't love the state flower?"

The name was then changed to Alamo Fire when it went under Wildseed Farms Inc. The seeds can be purchased from Wildseed Farms Inc. through their website and online seed catalog, or at their store in Fredericksburg, Texas. The seeds can also be found at several retailers in College Station including Aggieland Outfitters.

"A lot of good things have come out of it," Parsons said. "I don't regret doing it."

Besides creating seas of maroon, creating the maroon bluebonnet has impacted the nursery industry

by developing the transplant industry. The transplant industry involves the process of planting seeds to get a desired variety, allowing them to germinate, and continue to grow before it is finally potted and sold at a nursery.

Parsons said that several years after creating the maroon bluebonnet he and his team figured out the secret to getting the seed to germinate 10 days after being planted. Unlocking this secret, according to Parsons, created a million dollar industry in transplants alone.

"A lot of critics asked why would people want to grow bluebonnet transplants when they can go drive the highways and see them by the acres," Parson said. "The interesting thing about it is people want to see bluebonnets in their own backyards."

Though Parsons embarked on the project in 1982 and made his serendipitous stumble, it wasn't until the mid-90s when the maroon bluebonnet came into existence for others to enjoy.

"After I start something, I usually try to finish it," Parsons said.

After 20 years of Parson's perseverance, Aggies can now create a sea of maroon in their own backyards, pastures or even alongside county roads.



Horticultural Sciences Department Head, Dan Lineberger's, Ph.D. granddaughter posing in maroon bluebonnets.
Photo courtesy of Dan Lineberger, Ph.D.

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