



NWRC Director Dr. David Northington at the year-old headquarters of the national wildflower center.

National Wildflower Research Center

Better Than the Dream

Barely a year-old, the National Wildflower Research Center has big plans for establishing significant wildflower research. Breaking new ground is nothing new to the people behind the project.

by Maureen Hrehocik, managing editor

Dr. David Northington likens it to staring-down a freight train.

You feel the tracks rumbling and sense the behemoth on the horizon, but it really hasn't come into full view. The momentum, though, is unmistakable.

Northington is not referring to a puffing and grunting hunk of metal. He's referring to the increasing interest in wildflowers—those delicate splotches of color on roadsides and in fields that hardly register their existence with anything but the subconscious.

Yet, we know they're there.

Northington, 40, is executive and research director of the National Wildflower Research Center in Aus-

tin, TX. Barely a year old, the organization is surpassing even its own expectations for growth.

Really, it comes as no surprise, though, considering one of the country's most resourceful 71-year-olds is behind the project with capital, and more importantly, with love and an unsurpassed commitment—former First Lady Lady Bird Johnson.

"She is a vision," says Northington. "This Center is her dream. She also has a very practical grasp on things. Her knowledge goes beyond garden clubs.

"There are a lot of 'closet wildflower' lovers out there that we're just finding out about," he continues. "More than you'd ever imagine."

Northington acknowledges the Center has its work cut out for it.

Little if any research has been done on the propagation, species, diseases, hardiness or anything about wildflowers.

"At first, enthusiasm came from home gardeners and aesthetes. Now there are strong economic reasons for using wildflowers as well as increasing conservation awareness," explains Northington. "The biggest misconception about wildflowers is that they're for beauty only. The economy of them surprises people."

But it is their economic value that has started people sitting up and taking notice.

The National Wildflower Research Center is non-profit and dedicated to promoting and researching wildflowers and native grasses to further their use in three areas: improving the environment, for their economic value, and for aesthetic value. It also hopes to become a national clearinghouse for information about wildflowers and seed producers in the country.

"Every day something new is learned about wildflowers. We're not a university, we're not a commercial operation, we're not a bureaucracy. Everything we have and will find out we're willing to share. There are no negative aspects to what we do here," Northington notes.

And, from the 1,200 inquiries the Center received from May to October of last year the demand for knowledge is out there. Only 28 percent of those inquiries came from Texas.

Northington says his highest priority is to establish "significant research."

How it all began

Lady Bird Johnson, well known for her efforts to beautify America during the Johnson administration, planted the first seeds of the National Wildflower Research Center. On her 70th birthday, she decided she wanted to give the country a present. She decided on giving and preserving a part of our national heritage—wildflowers—because, in her own words, they had given so much beauty and pleasure to her over the years. Her gift came in the form of 60 acres of land in Austin and \$125,000 to build a research center, hire staff and begin research in the thus-far uncharted waters of wildflower propagation.

Northington is a botanist from the University of Texas at Austin. He began teaching at Texas Tech in 1971 and took over the curatorship of the E.L. Reed Herbarium at that time. He is now an associate professor of Biological Sciences. He is also director of

the Texas Tech University Center at Junction, a biological field station.

"Essentially, all my scientific interest and research for the past 12 years has been on flowering plants native to the Southwest, many of which are roadside wildflowers," says Northington.

The Center is a modest but attractive building. It employs eight full-time employees and 24 volunteers and a Board of Trustees of more than 100. The Center became fully functional last May. There are plans to hire a full-time research director, build a 2,000-square-foot and 3,200 square foot research building.

Learning experience

All research data collected, mailing lists and any information collected is put on the Center's computer to insure quick and efficient retrieval when a request comes in for information.

Their capital now comes from grants, contributions and fundraising efforts of their development director.

The Center, besides housing the administrative offices, has a herbarium where seeds are weighed and sorted and a greenhouse with another one in the planning stages.

"All of our more sophisticated tissue culture work is done for us at the University of Texas," says Northington. "Quality control is of the utmost importance to us."

Northington is currently testing commercial wildflower mixes at half the recommended seeding rate and at twice the rate. He's also interseeding buffalograss around the Center and seeing how they compete.

"We don't know when to seed and when to irrigate simply because no research has been done up to this point."

Northington stresses what the Center is doing is independent research to prove the viability of wildflowers.

"I'm not advocating that all golf courses go out and plant their roughs in wildflowers. They have to be right for the situation."

Taking the lead

While other states such as Minnesota, Nebraska, Massachusetts, Oklahoma and California have wildflower programs, Texas has distinguished itself as the bellweather.

For one thing, the state is one of the hardest hit with a dwindling water supply. Wildflowers have proven to consume less water than turf and require considerably less maintenance, saving in mowing costs.

Texas is also fortunate in having its highway department, a member of its

senate and some of its more prominent residents realizing the potential goldmine wildflowers can be.

Dallas resident Trammel Crow donates \$25,000 a year to the city for wildflower plantings.

Bob Lanier, head of the 70,000 miles of highways in Texas estimates six million acre-feet of water is consumed by roadside vegetation. His department has shown as much as \$8 million can be saved in mowing costs with wildflower plantings. His department doesn't mow until Texas' state flower, the bluebonnet, has bloomed.

In 1983, the highway department spent \$32 million for mowing. A pilot program by the department using selective mowings along highway rights-of-way in 24 Texas counties reduced mowing costs by 24.8 percent and enhanced the native vegetation. Projected statewide, the program could significantly reduce the state's annual \$32 million mowing cost. The entire state will be on the program this year.

Considering Texas' more than one million acres of highway rights of way, the decision seems to be an economically sound one.

"There's also a psychological advantage built in," he says, "People don't litter as much because the flowers are pretty."

Help is coming from political avenues as well.

Texas Senator Lloyd Bensen is responsible for a rider on a Highway Bill introduced by the Environment and Public Works/Transportation committee that would earmark 1/4 of all money spent on highways to be spent on wildflowers. He estimates the reduced maintenance of wildflowers would save taxpayers 25 percent, help property values, and beautify the area. One and a half million dollars has been appropriated for this purpose. Bensen said he has no doubt the bill will pass when Congress reconvenes.

What's ahead

A \$3 million endowment is the goal for the National Wildflower Research Center. Donations, benefit luncheons, and fundraising have filled the coffers halfway to that \$3 million goal. Fundraising efforts continue to go well.

Because the Center is so new, it needs everything. But, being less than a year old, the Center is well on its way to achieving its director's primary goal—that of establishing significant research in wildflowers.

It's no wonder baseball immortal Dizzy Dean's words come to mind for so many when describing the Center and its founder—"It ain't braggin' if you can do it."

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