

Exclusive Interview

Lady Bird Johnson: First Lady of Wildflowers

by Maureen Hrehocik, managing editor



Managing Editor, Maureen Hrehocik interviews Lady Bird Johnson.

Tenacity has never been a shortcoming of Mrs. Johnson.

The very genteel lady with the deep Texas drawl, clear brown eyes and ever-present smile, knows how to turn dreams into reality.

During Lyndon Johnson's administration, she was the driving force behind the Beautification of America campaign and left her mark, particularly in Washington, D.C.

On her 70th birthday two years ago she decided she had a very personal wish to do something for the country.

"Everything I had done up to this point was in some way connected to LBJ," she told WEEDS TREES & TURF. "Wildflowers had always given me joy and sustenance. Wildflowers can be enjoyed by so many—riding in a car we can see them along highway rights-of-way, public parks, in fields, just everywhere."

With that in mind, she donated 60 acres of land in Austin and \$125,000 to start the National Wildflower Research Center. She also donated

three years of her own time to promote it.

"I'm not real good at speaking or being self-assured, but I said I'd help in any way I could for three years."

If the former First Lady lacks any elocutionary skills or self assurance, she makes up for them with sincerity and with commitment.

Behind all that genuine good nature is a lady with a mission.

Mrs. Johnson revels in the beauty of wildflowers saying they've "filled me with a sense of wonder." But she also has a practical side.

She expressed concern over the amount of rain that fell in Austin in the fall because it was preventing seed to be sown at the research center. When a reporter mentioned to her about a golf course architect who had incorporated wildflowers into his golf course design, she wasted no time in pulling out a small notebook from her purse and jotting down his name and course location.

Her appetite for information for the research center is voracious.

It was a typical Texas early spring morning—the kind that seems as if the sky couldn't be any bluer or the air any sweeter.

Three people set out in a car to "scout" wildflowers along the Austin countryside.

They came upon a large field of pink evening primrose. In the middle of it, like Attila the Hun plundering, was a large tractor lumbering through the primroses, plowing them under.

The driver of the car was ordered to stop. A spry septuagenarian stepped from the car and flagged down the tractor operator.

"Do you own this field?" she queried. She was told the young man's father owned it.

What ensued was an agreement with the owner to stop plowing the field. The lady would rent it until after the primroses had gone to seed.

The orchestrator of the agreement and the lady willing to lock horns with the goliath chewing up the primroses was Lady Bird Johnson.

And that's why "wildflowering," or driving around the countryside looking for wildflowers, is one of her favorite pastimes.

She describes the incident of coming upon the field of primroses as one of her "most delicious memories."

What experience hasn't taught her, trial and error has.

"Once we had the field rented, we didn't really know how to harvest the seed, so we just went at it."

Mrs. Johnson said that if she worked at the Center full-time, her favorite assignment would be as a scout.

"I love to go out and find stands of different species, collect seed and find out where different varieties are located."

But Lady Bird Johnson is very satisfied with her life just the way it is.

"I've gone through life with seeing eyes," she philosophizes. "I've traveled, enjoyed the change of seasons; it's all filled me with a sense of wonder. I wouldn't want to change a single thing in my life." □