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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." □

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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.

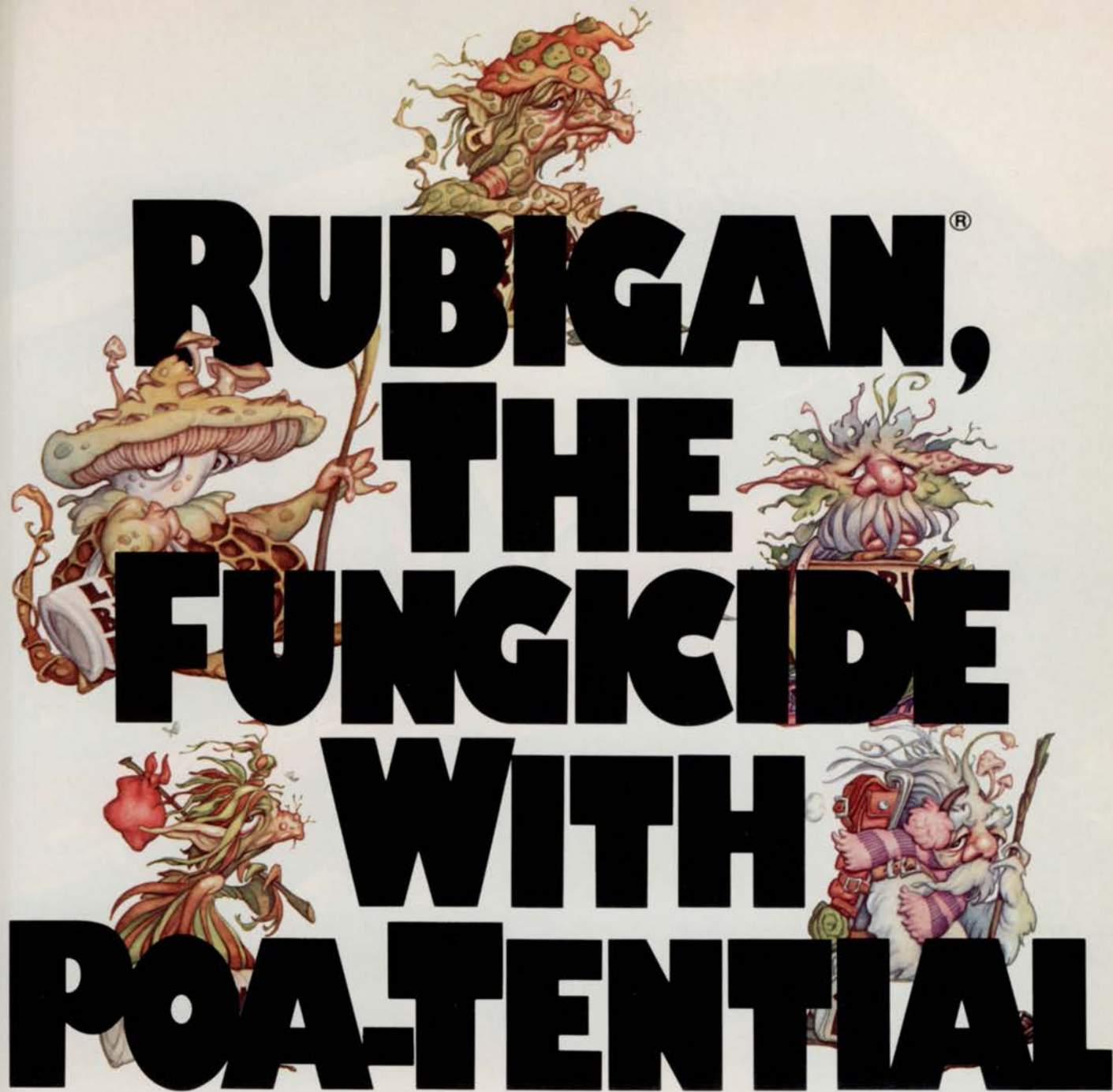
## What's ahead

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."

WT&T



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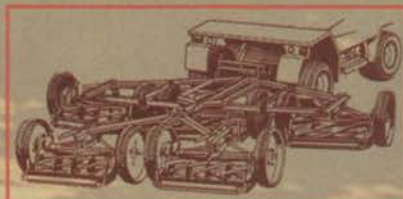
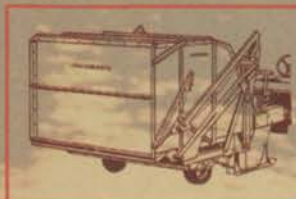
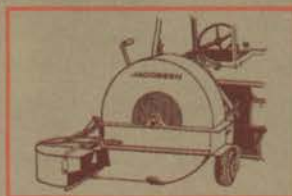
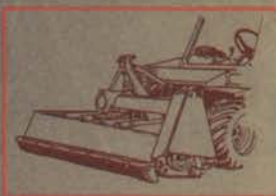
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**N**othing is quite as impressive as a bare patch of ground bursting into color with a profusion of flowers.

An increasing number of roadside departments, landscape architects and golf course superintendents are discovering they can provide this color, while saving themselves water and maintenance costs, by planting wildflowers.

A wildflower is a flowering plant that grows uncultivated or wild in an area. If adapted to that area's climate and soils, wildflowers require little or no care. Some people consider only native plants as wildflowers, but some of the most popular species are actually naturalized introductions.

Wildflowers are increasing in use for a variety of reasons on many different sites. They can provide a ground cover that requires no mowing and adds color in non-traffic areas of parks, golf courses and home landscapes. Alone, or in combination with non-aggressive grasses, they can stabilize and beautify roadside cuts, mining sites, and other disturbed areas.

The mixes offered by many companies are designed to provide an ever-changing palette of colors from spring until fall if growing conditions are right. They can add a touch of color to the corner of your yard or create a meadow over large areas.

## Planting

It is important to plant wildflower species adapted to your area. Many suppliers have regional or special-use mixes — designed for specific environments, while others include primarily wildflowers that have proven successful over a wide range of environments.

A mix should contain a balance of annual and perennial species. The annuals provide quick cover and color the first year and can usually be depended on to reseed themselves for flowering in subsequent years. Perennials provide flowers from the second year and beyond.

Wildflowers are often mixed with

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# Wildflowers

by Dr. Leah A. Brillman



Wildflowers are often mixed to provide a variety of color, wide adaptability, and quick cover with grasses. Photo courtesy of Wildseed Inc.





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## Sources for Wildflower Seeds

Company	Product
<b>Applewood Seed Company</b> 5380 Vivian St., Arvada, CO 80002 (303) 431-6283	Specialty and Regional Mixes, Individual Species
<b>Clyde Robin Seed Company</b> P.O. Box 2366, Castro Valley, CA 94546 (415) 785-0425	Regional, Season and Specialty Mixes, Individual Species
<b>Environmental Seed Producers, Inc.</b> P.O. Box 5904, El Monte, CA 91734 (213) 442-3330	Regional Mixes, Individual Species
<b>Jacklin Seed Company</b> W. 5300 Jacklin Ave., Post Falls, ID 83854 (208) 773-7581	Pinto Wildflower Mix, Appar Lewis Flax
<b>Lofts, Inc.</b> P.O. Box 146, Bound Brook, NJ 08805 (800) 526-3890	Pinto Wildflower Mix
<b>Mangelsdorf Seed Company</b> P.O. Box 327, St. Louis, MO 63166 (314) 535-6700	
<b>Mellingers Inc.</b> 2310 W. So. Range, North Lima, OH 44452 (216) 549-9861	
<b>Native Plants Inc.</b> 9180 South Wasatch Blvd., Sandy, UT 84092 (801) 943-3888	Mixtures, Individual Species
<b>Norm Thompson</b> Dept. 45-01, 13700 N.W. Science Park Dr., Portland, OR 97229	Meadow in a Can, Mixtures
<b>George W. Park Seed Co., Inc.</b> P.O. Box 31, Greenwood, SC 29647 (803) 374-3341	Mixtures, Individual Species
<b>Plants of the Southwest</b> 1812 Second Street Sante Fe, NM 87501	Mixtures, Individual Species
<b>S. &amp; S. Seeds</b> 910 Alphonse, Santa Barbara, CA 93103 (805) 965-5243	Mixtures, Individual Species
<b>Sharp Bros. Seed Company</b> P.O. Box 140, Healy, KS 67850 (316) 398-2231	
<b>Vaughan Seed Company</b> 5300 Katrine Ave., Downers Grove, IL 60515 (312) 969-6300	Instant Glamour Mixture

grasses to add soil stabilization and erosion control. It is important that the grasses used are clump types and not overly aggressive or the wildflowers will be crowded out.

In the Northern United States, chewings, sheep or hard fescue are often used with wildflowers, while tall fescue is often used in the Southern United States. Certain native grasses, such as Nezparr Indian ricegrass, sand lovegrass, side oats grama, bluegrama, etc., are sometimes combined with wildflowers, but these often grow slowly and are less useful for soil sta-

### Wildflowers are increasing in use for a variety of reasons on many different sites.

bilization, although they can be very attractive.

Grasses that are not suitable for use with wildflowers, unless wildflower islands are created, include many of the turf and forage grasses developed for their aggressive nature such as Kentucky bluegrass, annual or perennial ryegrass, orchardgrass, timothy or smooth brome.

### Establishment

The key to obtaining a good wildflower stand is proper establishment. Nature may depend on just scattering the seeds on the ground, but you should not risk a thin stand.

The first step to obtaining a good stand is soil preparation. The soil should be tilled using a plow, rototiller or hoe depending on the size of the area. If needed, soil amendments such as peat moss may be added to improve moisture and air-holding capacity of the soil.

The seed may be broadcast sown over the prepared area by hand or with a broadcast seeder if the area is small. For larger areas it is recommended to drill the seed in to a maximum of 1/4-inch or employ hydroseeding/hydromulching. If the seed is broadcast sown, it should be covered with a light layer (maximum 1/8-inch) of peat moss for mulch or lightly raked in. (Some seed will show.)

The most critical period for establishment is the next 4 to 6 weeks when the seeds must receive adequate moisture for germination and early growth. If irrigation is not available, it is best to plant the seeds before periods of natural rainfall. In California and many of the southern states the