

Stories of the Wild



**LEGENDS AND FOLK TALES
OF TEXAS' WILDFLOWERS**

By JANE KELLOGG MURRAY



Watching Texas' prairies and hillsides light up with seasonal wildflowers is a delight for the senses—a farewell to our short-lived winters and a harbinger of the warmer days to come. This symphony of color has played an important role throughout the centuries, its blooms providing medicine, inspiration, and beauty to lift the spirits. Study wildflower folklore, and you'll uncover the many mysteries behind their names, their virtues, and their uses. The more common the wildflower, the richer its history.

Previous spread: Indian paintbrush, lemon paintbrush, and bluebonnets dominate the landscape near Nelsonville. Right: A wild blend of daisies, bluebonnets, prairie verbena, winecups, and Indian paintbrush brighten up Kenedy in Karnes County.



Opening spread photo: © Don Allen; opposite page photo: © Tim Fitzharris; Wildflower portrait photos: © Seth Patterson



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.



Indian Blanket

Like these bright red-and yellow-flowers in the height of spring, the legends surrounding the Indian blanket's origin have grown wild through the ebb and flow of time. Three stories have become the most widespread in modern culture. The first, of Mexican origin, tells how the flower was once entirely yellow and beloved by the Aztecs. After Hernán Cortés invaded the Valley of Mexico beginning in 1519, the flowers were said to have been permanently stained red by the blood of the Aztecs. Another legend, first written down in 1928, tells the story of a young Native American girl lost in the woods, and as the cold night falls, she asks The Great Spirit to cover her with the beautiful blanket she had seen her mother weaving for her warrior father. When she wakes the next morning, she finds the fields covered in gaillardia, which her people call the Indian blanket from that day forward. A third legend describes a Native American weaver renowned for his exquisite blankets. Near the end of his life, he decides to weave his own burial blanket—a magnificent orange and red covering far more beautiful than anything he had ever created prior. The Great Spirit, so taken with the colors of the blanket, covers the weaver's grave with flowers of the same color and design the following spring. "Although we don't actually know if any of these are genuine Native American oral literature," Turner says, "the Kiowa Indians do consider the flowers to bring good luck, and they ornament their homes with them."

FIELD NOTES: Also known as firewheels, Indian blankets thrive in heat and bloom sporadically across the state's dry plains, open areas, and calcareous prairies in the western two-thirds of the state.

A field of red-and-yellow firewheels blanket the Hill Country near Dripping Springs.



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Prickly Pear Cactus

Texas' state plant boasts the distinction of being a vegetable, a fruit, and a flower—in fact, it was a runner-up when the Texas Legislature adopted the bluebonnet as the state's flower in 1901. "It has kept man from starving more than any other plant in the state," Turner asserts. "It's so widespread, you can find them anywhere you are in the state, rip the spines off, sauté the pads, and eat them." In addition to the sweet and juicy prickly pear fruits, Native Americans used younger prickly pear pads for food year-round, while mature pads acted as a poultice for wounds, among other medicinal uses.

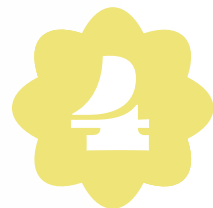
"Most people don't think of it as a wildflower because it's not an herbaceous plant, but it has that big showy flower," notes Andrea DeLong-Amaya, director of horticulture at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center in Austin. Most of Texas' prickly pear cacti feature yellow blooms sometime between April and June, with each flower only lasting a day or two. "There's a question as to whether that's the Yellow Rose of Texas," DeLong-Amaya points out, "because there is no native yellow rose."

Oftentimes people will notice a white "fungus" growing on these cacti. In fact it's not a fungus at all but the waxy webs of the cochineal insect. "If you take this white cottony fuzz and squish it in your hand, it'll turn red," Turner explains, "due to the carminic acid these tiny insects produce." The Aztecs discovered this centuries ago and used it to create a vibrant red dye. When the Spanish descended on South America in the 1500s, they were dazzled by the vibrancy of their reds. "It was difficult to get bright colors in the world at that time," Turner says. The Spanish colonials exported the dye back to Europe and eventually monopolized the market: cochineal dye was New Spain's third-highest export behind gold and silver until the discovery of synthetic dyes in the 1850s. It became a status symbol: The vibrant scarlet dyed the robes of European royalty, the redcoats of British officers, and eventually the jackets of the Canadian Mounties.

FIELD NOTES: The prickly pear is widespread across the state, hence its official state designation. Of the approximately 30 species in Texas, Engelmann's prickly pear—known for growing in dense clumps—is one of the most common.

Right: Some speculate whether the prickly pear cacti's yellow bloom is the true Yellow Rose of Texas, which carries some scandalous folklore of its own.





Indian Paintbrush

If bluebonnets are the star of the spring wildflower show, the Indian paintbrush is their co-star. Well, perhaps it's more of a sidekick; it's a parasitic plant, meaning it relies on other plants to grow—one of the many reasons it's often found embedded in a field of bluebonnets.

About 200 different species of the flower exist, and nine of them are native to Texas. While Indian paintbrush is by far the flower's most common name, it's also occasionally nicknamed butterfly weed, prairie fire, painted lady, and grandmother's hair. The latter name is attributed to the Chippewa tribe, who used the flower to make a hairwash and treat women's illnesses in addition to rheumatism.

The flower's common name comes from Native American folklore. A young painter, obsessed with capturing the colors and beauty of the sunset, grew frustrated that he had only crude paints made from pounded minerals and stiff brushes too rigid to copy the sky's nuances. He asked The Great Spirit for guidance. One night, an old man and a beautiful young woman came to him in a dream carrying a pure white deerskin. They whispered to him to use it as a canvas, and that as evening came, he should head to the hillside where he would find everything he needed to paint. The next day, he gathered all of his supplies and found paintbrushes of every hue—bright reds, oranges, and yellows. As the sun began to set, he stroked his deerskin canvas feverishly, discarding the brushes in the grass as he worked. The painting was a masterpiece—far more beautiful than anything he had ever painted before. The next morning, as he walked about the camp, he looked to the hill. There, where he'd tossed aside his brushes, were bright flowers in every color of the sunset.

FIELD NOTES: Native to East Texas, Indian paintbrush grow in prairies, plains, meadows, pastures, savannas, the edges of the woodlands, and along roadsides—thanks in part to the Texas Department of Transportation, which buys and sows about 30,000 pounds of wildflower seeds each year.

Right: Indian paintbrushes mingle with groundsel, pepper grass, phlox, and bluebonnets in Atascosa County near Somerset.

Photos: © Gary D. Regner (right); © Seth Patterson





A flourishing meadow of Brazos penstemon in Big Thicket National Preserve.

Right: A black-chinned hummingbird feeds on a blooming foxglove penstemon in the Hill Country.



Foxglove

Among the showiest and prettiest wildflowers in Texas is the foxglove, one of the two dozen penstemons native to Texas' rolling plains and Blackland Prairie. While modern medicine relies on European foxglove extracts to treat heart conditions, the variety is extremely poisonous—hence its nicknames, dead man's bells and witches' gloves. Texas' native penstemon, however, has never been known to be toxic, so it's dubbed false foxglove.

Some legends imply the plant brings protection. One Old English fable says foxes' tails hold potent charms against the devil, so mankind was constantly hunting these sly creatures. The king of the foxes appealed to the gods for help, and the gods gifted the foxglove flower. It was said that the animals hid in fields of these plants, and as their tails brushed against the bell-shaped flowers, bells rang to alert other foxes to run to safety. Another tale makes the fox the hunter: They slipped the flowers over their paws so hens in a hen house wouldn't hear them coming.

FIELD NOTES:

Penstemon cobaea, or "false foxglove," grows best in sandy or rocky open hillsides, limestone outcrops, and loamy soils across the rolling plains and Blackland Prairie south to the Gulf of Mexico.



From May to October, you may witness the golden glow of these wild annual flowers when driving along our state highways, their enormous blooms at times towering up to 10 feet above the earth. But, more often than not, they're a domesticated version cultivated by local farmers, an economic result of the sunflower seed's popularity as a tasty, salty snack. Archeologists excavating Native American dwellings have found evidence that sunflower seeds were an important source of nourishment as early as 1500 B.C. By the 1600s these flowers were common in gardens throughout the developed world, but the seeds were still largely overlooked. Meanwhile, East Texas' Caddo Indians had likely been farming them as food for centuries.

The sunflower holds a special significance to the University of Texas School of Law. As the story goes, around the turn of the 20th century, a committee of faculty and students decided seniors should wear caps and gowns to graduation ceremonies (in the first 15 or 20 years after the university was established, none of the school's graduates wore any regalia). The law students, annoyed that they weren't consulted to join the committee in the first place, rejected the new mandate, and later—when forced to choose graduation insignia—chose to wear the wild sunflower. The official reasoning they gave was twofold: Wildflowers, like lawyers, are widely distributed throughout the world, and just as the sunflower keeps its face turned to the sun, the lawyer turns to the light of justice. The tradition has lasted more than a century.

FIELD NOTES: More than 15 different sunflower species are native to Texas, but most people tend to think of the annual sunflower: *helianthus annuus*. It grows best in dry, open areas and in disturbed soil.



Left: Wild young sunflowers follow the sun throughout the day like a faithful dog following its owner—a phenomenon called heliotropism. Above: Firewheels, purple horsemint, and sunflowers at sunset in Travis County near Austin.

Below: A colorful splash of prairie verbena finds life in the Chihuahuan Desert at Franklin Mountains State Park.
Opposite: Yucca in bloom along the edge of the Laguna Madre, along the Gulf of Mexico.




Yucca

Native Texans held the yucca in high regard for many practical uses. “Literally every part of the plant yields something of value,” Turner says. Hispanic and Anglo settlers, the Apaches, and Kiowas all roasted the yucca’s stalks or dried them for eating in times of need. Prehistoric humans reportedly twisted the yucca’s fiber into twine and rope, used for anything from belts to bow strings. And the yucca’s roots can be pounded to a pulp and mixed with water to make a shampoo of sorts; the Comanche and Pueblo tribes believe it makes hair long, strong, and glossy, so using it before partaking in traditional ceremonies is required. Hopi tribal members wash the head of a newborn with yucca soap when they are 20 days old, and similar products are made today and sold in specialty shops—A Wild Soap Bar, for example, has been making a Yucca Root Shampoo and Body Bar in its Manor-based soap studio for more than 20 years; the product has become so in-demand in recent years that the company has begun selling to stores nationwide.

FIELD NOTES: The thin-leaved Arkansas yucca has the widest range in Texas, commonly found in prairies, plains, meadows, pastures, and savannas. Drought-tolerant species like banana yucca, beaked yucca, and Thompson yucca are prevalent in the Trans-Pecos mountains. 🌵

Despite a black thumb, Texas Highways Events Editor Jane Kellogg Murray has never met a flower she didn’t like.