

Wildflowers of Texas

The annals of Texas history tell of hardy pioneers determined to subjugate nature, not foster or contemplate it. Yet every spring, Texas bursts into a canopy of wildflowers unmatched by any other state. People from all over the world pour in to photograph and visit this radiant dance of color. Why Texas, of all places? How did flowers come to be a badge of distinction and pride? Questions like these are bound to arise.

Part of the answer lies in the fact that Texas contains enormous expanses of sun-drenched land. Flowers tend to be sun worshippers. Only a few species are capable of blooming in the shady depths of Eastern forests. Not only does Texas have lots of treeless terrain, it also has multiple distinct ecosystems. Differences in rainfall, temperature and soil composition suit the needs of a variety of flowering plants. In consequence, we may come upon wild orchids in the humid Big Thicket, orange blossoms in the subtropics of the Rio Grande, a carpet of bluebonnets with an interlacing of Indian paintbrush in the Hill Country. At times we can spy fleeting blooms of ocotillo, cenizo and yucca in the Chihuahuan Desert, prairie verbena and Indian blanket in the plains of North Texas.

Texas flora benefited from an astute and stalwart champion, Lady Bird Johnson. While First Lady in the mid-1960s, she advocated planting native flowers along the nation's highways. Nowhere did this program produce more stunning results than in Texas. Actually the Texas Department of Transportation had already implemented conservation measures starting 30 years earlier: its delayed roadside mowing until spring flowers had gone to seed. Now, as a new century proceeds, TxDOT buys and scatters 15 tons of flower seeds on state roads every year.

“Earth laughs in flowers,” wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson.¹ With over 5000 species to deploy, Texas seems rather to be guffawing . . . but that is close to the same thing.

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¹ Emerson, Ralph Waldo, “Hamatreya,” *Early Poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. New York & Boston: Thomas Y. Crowell & Company, 1899, poem at <http://www.emersoncentral.com/poems/hamatreya.htm> (accessed May 29, 2009).

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