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ARNOSKY FAMILY
Farms in Blanco
grows marigolds for
Día de los Muertos
and Diwali
celebrations.

Photo: Tom McCarthy Jr.



LAST SPRING, the Blue Barn was converted into a full-time, self-serve market with honor-system payment.

From Gloom to Bloom

COVID-19 came *this close* to wreaking havoc on Arnosky Family Farms

By Allison McNearney

ARNOSKY FAMILY FARMS
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The Blue Barn Farm Market is open daily, 9 a.m.-3 p.m.



When COVID-19 slammed into the U.S. last March, nearly 30,000 Dutch irises were about to bloom on Frank and Pamela Arnosky's farm in the Hill Country town of Blanco. They were destined for H-E-B floral departments around the state. But just before harvest, the Arnoskys received a call. Due to an inundation of panicked shoppers at the beginning of the pandemic, H-E-B was temporarily closing certain specialty departments, floral among them, in order to dedicate its resources to stocking staples.

Staring down a major financial loss at the beginning of a year that was shaping

up to be more unpredictable than even farmers were prepared for, the Arnoskys made a big decision.

"We put all these irises out in our Blue Barn, buckets and buckets of them, and we said, 'They're buy one, get one free,'" Frank says. During normal times, the Blue Barn Farm Market is the community hub of the Arnoskys' flower operation, open to visitors throughout the week, with a farmers market on weekends. But as COVID-19 escalated and the irises bloomed, the Arnoskys turned it into a full-time, self-serve market with honor-system payment.

It was a hit. In just three weeks, all of the irises were gone, the Arnoskys broke even, and there was a crop of newly quarantined Texans with smiles on their faces and fresh-cut flowers on their tables. A few weeks later, the H-E-B floral department resumed its regular activity.

Other flower farmers around the state shared similar experiences. Business looked precarious with several big-box stores initially scaling back their floral orders, and the cancellation of events ranging from farmers markets to weddings, due to stay-at-home orders. But as the pandemic became the new normal, Texans not only began to buy flowers at record levels, they also prioritized buying local. "The pandemic really did not hurt my business at all," says Rita Anders, owner of Cuts of Color in Weimar. "I think the pandemic actually made people enjoy their homes, and they wanted flowers more than ever."

The Arnoskys were still recovering from several years of business losses at the start of 2020, which had caused them to put their Blanco farm on the market for a short time and to think about retiring. But in a strange twist, COVID-19 proved to be an unexpected boon for flower sales. The couple ended 2020 with renewed excitement and big plans for the future of their nearly 30-year-old family business.

On a warm Sunday in mid-October, Frank and Pamela were in the Blue Barn, greeting masked guests and offering kids the chance to pick a pumpkin from the nearby flower beds. It was the height of

Photo: Tom McCarthy Jr.

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marigold season, and monarch butterflies fluttered through the colorful blooms outside. Inside, the Arnoskys were stripping leaves from the lower stems of what would eventually be 20,000 bunches of marigolds, banding the bundles together, and dropping them into buckets of flower food. Within 48 hours, the sea of marigolds surrounding them would be at H-E-Bs around the state to accommodate the demand sparked by Día de los Muertos and Diwali celebrations.

The Arnoskys met at Texas A&M University when Pamela was an undergraduate and Frank was a graduate student, but their romance blossomed several years later during a series of serendipitous meetings that culminated in back-to-back weekends dancing to the Texas polka band Brave Combo. Thirty-one years later on a balmy Hill Country day, Frank sports the same bushy beard and Pamela the same trademark long braids they did on

their wedding day.

Because of Frank's education in and passion for horticulture, the pair always felt farming was their destiny, but it took a few years and a little trial and error to realize that cut flowers had big potential.

In 1992, on the 12 acres of land they had recently acquired in Blanco, the Arnoskys planted their first crop of snapdragons and statice. Two years later, they secured their inaugural client, Central Market, a grocery store owned by H-E-B. This proved to be a fortuitous partnership. Well before buying local became popular, the upscale chain debuted with an emphasis on offering specialty products right as the Arnoskys were attempting to innovate the way flowers were promoted by labeling their bouquets as "Fresh from the Texas Hill Country."

"When we started in 1993, there was nobody who was marketing local flowers," Frank says. "In fact, most flowers didn't

even have a brand on them; they just had a plain plastic sleeve. So, we were one of the first people in the country to put our name on a sleeve to identify where the flowers come from.

Today, the Arnoskys farm during all four seasons on 20 of their 88 acres in Blanco. They also cultivate 16 acres in Minnesota for late-season peonies and 7 1/2 acres in Fort Davis for early-season peonies. From the 30,000 seedlings they plant in the ground each week during growing season, they produce 2,500 mixed bouquets and another 2,000 single-flower bunches a week. Everything they grow is sold in Texas—under their Texas Specialty Cut Flowers brand—through Central Market and H-E-B, or in the Blue Barn.

"The thing that we never thought about when we started is, I thought we were just going to be some kind of little subsistence

farm," Pamela says. "But flowers bring people together and open doors, so we have met some amazing people."

In 1995, they began a friendship with Lady Bird Johnson after cold-calling the LBJ Library to see if they could deliver some experimental long-stemmed blue-bonnets to the former first lady. And in 2001, they were invited to one of George W. Bush's presidential inaugural balls, an opportunity secured because of the flowers they provided to the Governor's Mansion in Austin while Bush was in residence.

Though farming is their passion, they are just as committed to preserving and uplifting their community in Blanco. One of the groups that has recently made use of the Blue Barn is the movement against the Permian Highway Pipeline. The pipeline project is routed just over a mile outside of downtown Blanco, a small town that is finally starting to recover from the devastating Hill Country floods of 2015.

"We were all just on the idea that Blanco is really hitting its stride as a rural destination," Frank says. "The momentum was there and then all of a sudden, you get told there's a pipeline going through town. It's kind of a death punch."

Ultimately, the opposition effort failed, partially due to the momentum drain of COVID-19. And while the couple remains concerned for the pipeline's impact on the area, Pamela says, "We won't notice the pipeline as much once it rains—and if they plant wildflowers on it."

A more pressing issue is securing their legacy. The Arnoskys face the same dilemma as many farmers today, whose average age is now 58 years old: So far, none of their four children have expressed a desire to permanently take over the business. Without a clear succession plan, the Arnoskys are trying to find a way to preserve their valuable piece of undeveloped Hill Country land as San Antonio and Austin slowly converge on the area.

"This farm has to pass to the next generation, some kind of a way," Pamela says. "The land was here before we were; it's going to be here after. It ought to be our bounden duty to not turn it into a subdivision. It needs to be kept in green space." 🌱



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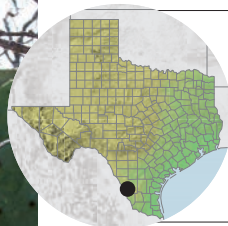
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The Brush Country of the South Texas borderland is a harsh place. Part Chihuahuan Desert and part Tamaulipan thorn-scrub, it's an impenetrable no man's land where if something doesn't stick, sting, or bite, it's probably a rock. It might just be the roughest piece of Texas.

One morning early last March, an inquisitive woman from Laredo named Mari Vargas; my wife, Kris Cummings; and I convened in East Laredo. We gathered near the bamboo thicket outside the residence of Tony Ramirez in the Heights neighborhood, admiring fat grapefruit and brightly colored oranges hanging on trees in the garden. We had signed up for "Medicine in the Wild," Ramirez's walking lecture in the brush about the plants within that have medicinal uses.

Ramirez isn't just a tour guide; he's considered a *médico tradicional*, or traditional healer, among the Nahua/Chichimeca people. But unlike Mexican folk saints Don Pedro Jaramillo, El Niño Fidencio, and Teresita Urrea, he focuses strictly on the practical: identifying and collecting useful plants. Consider it the fieldwork for discovering increasingly popular herbal remedies.

We were dressed for our adventure in pants and long-sleeved shirts, and we carried a lot of water. Ramirez had a straw hat with feathers in the band, and a machete and pistol strapped to his side. We peppered him with questions as he drove us in his SUV 20 minutes east before stopping to open a ranch gate. Vargas was rapt.

For the past two years, she has studied alternative medicine, working with medical doctors from Monterrey, Mexico, who venture into the same brush in search of natural medicine. She'd registered for Ramirez's workshop to learn how to better

address her family's and friends' ailments. "My parents are from Mexico and lived in a place where medicinal plants were all they had to treat illness," she said.

The vehicle continued down a dirt path and came to a final stop beside a concrete slab with an aluminum roof that serves as a staging area for hunters and anglers dropping lines in a nearby stock tank. The brush beckoned, but before we entered, Ramirez gathered us around a mesquite with a canopy of fresh pale-green spring leaves. This is the signature tree of the Brush Country.

"The mesquite has a lot of uses beyond cooking," Ramirez explained. "Its beans are a protein source. Its leaves are good in tea for gastrointestinal problems and as an astringent for topical infection prevention. If you have conjunctivitis, rinse and crush the fresh green leaves, mix them with a bit of clean water, and squeeze the antimicrobial liquid into the affected eye as eye drops."

He knelt down and surveyed the stubby succulents covering the ground below the mesquite. He pointed to halophyte saladilla, a plant whose sap was a source of salt for Native Americans. Then guereque, a member of the melon family whose tuber contains monoglyceride compounds that can treat diabetes. Next, a pencil-thin cactus called sacasil, used to treat insect bites and bone fractures.

"You think this stuff out here is just brush," Ramirez said with a smile. "Everything here has value."

The Laredo native grew up in a family that practiced herbal medicine. His *abuelo*, proprietor of the Glorioso Medicine Company in Laredo, formulated liniments and poultices, which he sold town to town, ranch to ranch. And his *abuela* was a healer who cleansed people with medicine from her garden. "Growing up, whenever I'd get sick, I was taken to my grandmother," Ramirez said. "If I didn't get better taking whatever tea or herb she gave me, I'd go to a doctor."

This old school method of dealing with illness or injury is still practiced in communities and rural parts of the Texas-Mexico borderland. It serves as inspiration

Photo: Tom McCarthy Jr.

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In Wild Pursuit

Tony Ramirez ventures into the Brush Country in search of plants with healing powers

By Joe Nick Patoski

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for the increased usage of herbal and natural medicine among a population seeking alternatives to prescription drugs. But the inexperienced user should exercise extreme caution.

“It is hugely important, [for those teaching about] native plants in any capacity that might encourage someone to ingest anything, to use the botanical names,” said Lynn Marshall, research coordinator for Useful Wild Plants, an Austin-based organization devoted to Texas’ botanical domain. “Common names can be applied to multiple species, and a mistake has the potential to be fatal.”

After a career with Texas Instruments and IBM, Ramirez returned to Laredo in the 1970s to study ethnobotany and folk medicine through college classes, books, and talking to elders. He authored numerous papers and learned the ways of healers from Chichimeca, Huastec, Huichol, and Nahua natives in Central Mexico.

Following a stint with the Texas Department of Agriculture, he has led students at the UT Health Science Center Regional Campus at Laredo into the brush since '96.

He was also a columnist for *LareDOS*, a newspaper turned online news journal, in the late '90s and early '00s. “His writing bore the careful note of credibility that came from experience and research,” said Meg Guerra, *LareDOS* publisher and editor. “Each column was a gift of information, such that many consulted Tony for the herb and tree-bark remedies we once heard our grandmothers discuss.”

As we put on our backpacks to enter the brush, Ramirez produced a small bundle of dried native tobacco tied together for a *limpia*. “We do a cleansing before we enter the brush,” he said. Vargas went first, standing with her arms extended. Ramirez waved the bundle in all seven directions: east, south, west, north, above, middle, and below. After my cleansing, Ramirez let me cleanse him.

Off we went, following an animal path into the brush. “Be careful,” Ramirez said. “This area has a lot of jumping cactus. They’re really well-camouflaged.” Early on, he spotted fresh scat on the sandy path—mountain lion. He holstered his pistol and suggested we stay vigilant.

We stopped every 20 or so paces to investigate plants. Ramirez identified each and pointed out their uses. When the thicket grew impassable, he pulled out his machete and whacked out a path. Though our pace slowed, Ramirez’s talk continued apace as he pointed in every direction, settling on a *junco* plant. “It’s used for stomachaches and dizziness,” he said.

Eventually, we stopped at a tree in a small clearing, with colored twine wrapped around a few branches. At 8 feet high, it was tall enough to provide shade if we squatted down and didn’t perch in the nest of thorns thriving in the understory.

“This is the medicine tree,” Ramirez explained, reaching into a small bag to

Mother Nature’s Natural Remedies

A sampling of healing plants from Tony Ramirez’s Brush Country tour. Consult a medical professional before using.

Bitter Goat Brush

“This plant can save your life. It will kill amoebas.”

Blackbrush Acacia

“It can be used as a topical antibacterial to treat sores that aren’t responding to medication.”

Gobernadora (Creosote)

“It’s a really versatile plant: antifungal, antibacterial, antibiotic, and antiviral.”

Palo Santo (Guayacán)

“This is where Mucinex comes from. It’s an expectorant and COX-2 inhibitor that fights inflammation.”

Pita (Yucca or Spanish Dagger)

“It’s flavorful, an anti-inflammatory, and a phytosteroid.”

fetch more colored twine. “Each color represents something: black for fear, white for compassion, green for healing, yellow for vision, red for strength and power, blue for protection.” He encouraged us to tie some twine to a branch, which we did.

After resting, we ventured back toward the day shelter. We’d been in the brush close to two hours, but we hadn’t walked much more than a mile. Ramirez checked his phone and said the high inside the brush had reached 108 degrees. Back at his place, Ramirez handed out certificates for completing his workshop. “These plants aren’t going to replace medicine,” he admitted. “What you learned is this is another tool for your toolbox.”

Driving back to Austin on Interstate 35, the Brush Country looked as harsh and forbidding as ever. This time, though, I knew that deep inside there was a whole other story. 🐾



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Scrolling Through Bluebonnets

Julian Onderdonk, “the father of Texas painting,” lives on via Twitter

By Austin Kleon

Legislators named the bluebonnet the state flower in 1901, but the man who would become famous for painting them, Julian Onderdonk, was leaving Texas for New York at the time. Up north, Onderdonk studied with painters Robert Henri and William Merritt Chase, who convinced him to get outside in the open air and pay close attention to light and shadow. After years of struggle in New York, Onderdonk returned to his hometown of San Antonio in 1909. With fresh eyes on his native state, he found his ultimate subject, and painted the bluebonnet-covered landscapes that would make his name. Tragically, he died at the peak of his success in 1922, at only 40 years old, but he left a trail of imitators behind. Some now call him “the father of Texas painting.”

Almost a century later, I’m stuck at home during a pandemic, scrolling through the @julianonderdonk Twitter feed and looking at images of paintings with titles such as “Bluebonnets on a Grey Day,” “Bluebonnets at Dusk,” “Bluebonnets at Twilight, near San Antonio,” “Morning in the Bluebonnets,” “Late Afternoon in the Bluebonnets,” and “Bluebonnet Field” (left). I can’t tell if the pictures make me more or less lonely, but I feel the urge to jump in the car and drive to the Hill Country.

The feed is an “art bot” created by Andrei Taraschuk, a Colorado-based, Russian-born software engineer. In a 2018 Ignite Boulder talk, Taraschuk described it as a social media account that runs on autopilot. “I know what you guys are thinking,” he joked. “‘Oh no, not another Russian building bots.’” But instead of spreading disinformation, he’s on a mission to beautify social media. He’s trained hundreds of art bots—a whole “network of dead artists” including @agnesmartinart, @rauschenbergbot, and @edekooning—to follow each other and retweet each other’s work. Taraschuk estimates the bots have shared over 1 million pieces of art. For Texans who can’t get enough of bluebonnet season, following @julianonderdonk is like being served fresh flowers all year long. 🌵

Bee-haw!

We have bees to thank for our beloved Texas wildflowers

By Melissa Gaskill



Mention bees, and most people picture the familiar little honeybee, *Apis mellifera*. Native to Europe and first domesticated in Africa or Eurasia thousands of years ago, this species produces honey and beeswax and pollinates plants and agricultural crops. But Texas is home to more than 800 native bee species that pollinate the state’s plants.

While most of these natives don’t produce honey, their life cycles are synced with those of native flowers, and they have physically adapted to the shapes and needs of Texas plants. For example, since bluebonnets bloom early, their pollinators can withstand cooler temperatures. And bluebonnets’ pollen-producing parts are tucked behind fused petals known as a keel, so bumble, digger, and mason bees know to put weight on the keel to open the flower. These subtle connections between native bees and plants make their survival possible.

“Without native pollinators, we wouldn’t have all those roadside flowers in spring,” says Ross Winton, invertebrate biologist at Texas Parks and Wildlife.

Unfortunately, both foreign honeybee and native bee populations are declining due to a combination of habitat loss, pesticide use, disease, air pollution, and climate change. More hot days, for example, affects bumblebees, as does increasing urbanization.

Bees need both nesting places and food, says Laurel Treviño, outreach coordinator at the University of Texas Department of Integrative Biology’s Jha Lab. “You can provide plenty of food, but if they have nowhere to nest, they aren’t going to hang around,” she explains.

You can help bees by providing habitat like bare ground or fallen logs, or by building a nesting block (see illustration). To provide food, plant native plants or leave them where they grow naturally. Limiting pesticide use is important, too. Chemicals used to exterminate ants and other pests are not specific and will affect anything that comes into contact with them. “Just be targeted in your approach,” Winton says.

800+

Number of bee species native to Texas

2 million

Number of flowers it takes to make 1 pound of honey

\$3 billion+

Annual value of pollination provided by native bees to U.S. agriculture

Keeping Busy

Honeybees and native bees pollinate nearly 90% of wild plants, including wildflowers, and about a third of U.S. crops.

Different bees have different ways of collecting pollen. Bumblebees, for example, are “buzz pollinators,” Treviño says. “They hug the flower and vibrate really fast, shaking the pollen out like salt from a shaker.”

Most female bees are intentional collectors when they are nesting. But bees are generally more accidental pollinators: Pollen sticks to hairs on their body at one flower and fall off at the next. “Bees that go from sunflower to sunflower, one tomato plant to the next, or one bluebonnet to the next are more effective pollinators,” Treviño says.



How to Build a Bee Abode

Native bees nest in the ground or other cavities, and you can build them a nesting block to provide shelter. The types of bees that use these blocks are normally nonaggressive, so there’s no need to worry about stings.

1. Use a 4-by-8-inch block of untreated wood, or combine other sizes to form a block at least 8 inches tall.

2. Drill holes varying from ¼- to ¾-inch diameter, 3 to 6 inches deep, spaced ¾ inch apart. Stop holes about ½ inch from the
- back of the block. Use a sharp drill bit at a high speed to create a smooth interior that won’t damage bee wings.

3. Attach a roof.

4. Secure firmly to a building, fence, or post at least 3 feet above the ground.
5. Orient the face toward the southeast.

6. Leave in place through winter—the bees will vacate the space for hibernation—or put in an unheated garage and replace outdoors in late winter or very early spring.

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