

Mr. Texas Bluebonnet, Carroll Abbott, Previous Kerrville Resident

Next Saturday, April 23, the Kerrville Chapter of the Native Plant Society of Texas (NPSOT), in conjunction with the Native Plant Sale and Festival at Riverside Nature Center, will have a Dedication to the founder of NPSOT and former Kerrville resident, Carroll Abbott.

Abbott was born in 1926 and grew up in Houston. Even at an early age he was fascinated by wildflowers. His mother said he always had a container of wildflowers in his room as a young child. Abbott is quoting as saying, "My earliest memory is of a blood-red phlox with melting snow on it from a freak storm in Houston. It looked like diamonds sparkling on the leaves. I was about 5 years old."

As a young boy he made money by collecting seeds and bulbs of wildflowers and selling them to people, and he dug up plants from along railroad tracks and highways and sold them to nurseries.

He began a career in the newspaper business working for the Houston Post while still only 16. He lived briefly in Los Angeles and attended USC and worked on a paper there before returning to Houston, getting married and again started to work with the Houston Post.

Abbott's parents moved to Kerrville in 1948, purchasing a property diagonally across the river from Riverside Nature Center on Francisco Lemos--there is still a plaque on a bolder there today.

Abbott moved his family to Kerrville in 1955 and went to work for the Kerrville Times (it was a weekly then). He soon became editor and won awards for the best weekly newspaper three years in a row!

Throughout all of this time Abbott was never far from wildflowers and native plants, especially in efforts to educate people about them and to propagate and distribute them. He also became active in politics, successfully managing several candidates' campaigns over the years, traveling all over the state and collecting wildflowers and knowledge as he went.

In 1970 he quit politics and devoted the rest of his life to wildflowers, especially bluebonnets. Benny Simpson, noted native plant expert and author, called Abbott "Mr. Texas Bluebonnet", and once said of Abbott, "He could sell you 50 seeds, and once, a pound, a ton, or a carload of bluebonnet seeds." Abbott started a quarterly newsletter about wildflowers in 1976.

In the late 1970s Abbott, in collaboration with Dr. Mary Evelyn Huey, President of Texas Women's University, Lady Bird Johnson, Benny Simpson, and many others, held many discussions on the subject of establishing a Native Plant Society of Texas. The society was officially established on Wildflower Day (now known as Earth Day) in April 1981.

Abbott once stated, "For years, it seemed that only God and Lady Bird Johnson, not necessarily in that order, were concerned with wildflower survival. Somebody had to 'step up to the bar' and get the job done. I decided to be that person."

Abbott died of cancer in July, 1984.

NPSOT has been one of the major driving forces for the education of the public on the importance of native plants and the ill effects of exotic plants and animals therein as well as advocating for the preservation of native habitats. There are local chapters in Kerrville, Boerne and Fredericksburg. I strongly support all their efforts.

Hill Country native plants grew up here and evolved along with all the animals, birds, pollinators, soil, caliche and weather we still have in the Hill Country. If we are to keep the native habitat healthy and functioning, we need to protect and propagate native plants and work to eliminate exotic plants from our landscape.

The Dedication will be at 10:00 on Saturday, April 23. You can also view the Carroll Abbott garden and buy some native plants.

I feel a particular connection to Carroll Abbott because in 2012, my first book, "Hill Country Landowners Guide" was awarded the Carroll Abbott Memorial Award by the Native Plant Society of Texas.

Until next time...

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the books "Hill Country Landowner's Guide" and "A Beginner's Handbook for Rural Texas Landowners: How to Live in the Country Without Spoiling It". He can be reached at jstmn@kctc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.