

## NICE! Plant of the Season Reported by Rozanna Francis

### Texas Bluebonnet, *Lupinus texensis*: State Flower of Texas

**Description:** Texas Bluebonnet, *Lupinus texensis*, is a low-growing Texas icon. It is one of five Bluebonnets recognized as the Texas State Flower; the other four are *L. subcarnosus*, *L. havardii*, *L. concinnus* and *L. plattensis*. The five lupine species grow in different areas of Texas, with *L. texensis* predominating in Central and North Texas. In spring, blooming *L. texensis* is a common sight along roadsides and fields and is increasingly cultivated in sunny front yards. It is the easiest of the species to cultivate, usually growing up to 18 inches tall and equally wide, with flowers held higher. It has oblong palmate light-green compound leaves, usually with five leaflets. Healthy plants have a tap root and as legumes, Bluebonnets are capable of forming symbiotic nitrogen fixing root nodules with soil bacteria called rhizobia, allowing them to enrich the soil with nitrogen.

**Flowers and Seeds:** Bluebonnets usually bloom from early March to mid-April or later depending on spring temperatures. The flowers are held on a 7-12 inch stalk, with deep bright blue flowers at the bottom to white on the top. All-white, pink and maroon cultivars are available. After the flowers fade, seeds form. Because it is an annual, the flat 1/8 inch seeds must fully mature in the pod and fall to the ground to assure a display next year without re-planting.

**Planting sites:** Texas Bluebonnets should be planted in full sun, at least 8-10 hours a day. They prefer well-drained soils and are drought tolerant.

**Watering Instructions:** Texas Bluebonnet seed may be watered after planting. The plant is drought tolerant and will survive during long dry spells. It will rot if well-watered.

**Comments:** In Texas, flowering Bluebonnets let us know spring has arrived. Texas Bluebonnet is a winter-hardy annual and may be transplanted into a sunny location, ideally in fall. To establish Bluebonnets from seed, start in summer or early fall. Scarify the seed by rubbing with sandpaper, then rake or press the seeds into the soil, barely cover them with soil and water once. If available, rhizobial inoculant should be applied to establish the nitrogen fixing root nodules that help Bluebonnets grow. Frequently, rhizobia are already in the soil. Bluebonnets are beautiful in large drifts or grown in well-drained containers. They are frequently inter-planted with summer- or fall-flowering plants that emerge as the Bluebonnets are setting seed and senescing. These include Zexmenia (*Wedelia texana*), Mealy Blue Sage (*Salvia farinacea*), and Lantana (*Lantana urticoides*). Bluebonnets provide nectar for bees and are the larval host for the Hairstreak and Elfin butterflies. Use caution because Bluebonnets, especially the seed, can be toxic if ingested.

Look for the NICE! Plant of the Season signs and information sheets on your next visit to a participating North Texas nursery. Thank you for using native plants in your landscapes.



**Texas Bluebonnet, Photo courtesy of Marilyn Blanton**