

Re-thinking the Family Farm

By Erin Hoffer and Deb Bliss

If you travel up the interstate, over a few county roads and down winding, uneven sandy paths, you will discover a hidden oasis alive with wildlife and redolent with the perfume of summer: Lavender Ridge Farm. On June 19, owners, Jane and Jerry Dane, welcomed 20 *Live Green in Plano* volunteers and enthusiastically guided everyone through the family property now planted with fragrant Provence lavender.

Originally a strawberry and melon farm in the 1920's, the siblings changed the land's focus in 2004 from cotton-farming and horse-grazing to producing crops that promoted agritourism. After much research, they settled on lavender and prepared the land for their first 2,800 plants. Most proved to be hearty survivors of drought and baseball-sized hail but many eventually succumbed to the season's heavy rains. Undaunted, the Danes worked to reduce low spots in the fields and rallied their friends for a planting party to restore their crop of fragrant perennials.

Although the State of Texas encourages diversification from planting soy, corn and cotton, granting agricultural tax exemptions to qualified applicants, the Danes had to build a strong case beyond their cut-flower production, demonstrating their dedication to wildlife preservation. Strategically-placed brush piles and shrubby trees attract bluebirds and provide nesting sites for painted bunting, indigo bunting and the pileated woodpecker. Native plants in the butterfly garden serve as a food source for hummingbirds. Friends, volunteers and bird-watching groups help compile the annual bird census that allows Lavender Ridge Farm to maintain its agricultural status.

Whether exploring the grounds to watch pet rabbits, goats and chickens or patiently cutting nose-gays from the field, visitors are reminded this is a working farm and lavender is at the heart of it. The plant's natural antiseptic and anti-fungal qualities and its use as a calming agent in sachets and food offer many ways to enjoy the crop. Lunch at the farm's café features lavender-infused lemonade, chicken salad, vinaigrette, ice cream and cheesecake. The gift shop shelves are filled with a variety of lavender-based pillows, oils, syrups and hand-salves as well as lavender-inspired aprons and note cards. If you missed the fieldtrip, you can enjoy a peek into the farm at <http://www.lavenderridgefarms.com>.

Thirty minutes west of Lavender Ridge Farm, another set of siblings is also re-thinking the use of family farmland. Kevin and Nathan Bruce have taken a portion of land that has been in their family for 110 years and created North Texas Organics & Wormery. Their mission is to preserve "the environment and all living things by providing the tools and information necessary to make Vermiculture second nature and the first thought, to local farmers and hobby gardeners."

In a shed constructed of repurposed wood scrap, 16 four-by eight-foot worm bins are double-stacked like bunk beds. Inside, under round-the-clock lights, red wigglers gobble organic scraps from a local restaurant, dried molasses and composted horse manure to produce the nutrient-rich castings that are highly valued as fertilizer. Daily watering, carpet-scrap cover and corrugated cardboard reduce flies and odor, help retain moisture and provide a perfect nursery for worm cocoons. Worms reproduce easily in this habitat, doubling their numbers every ninety days and providing a rich harvest of castings every six months.

Although the majority of the organic vermi-compost product is turned into compost tea for commercial application and spread with a crop duster, the brothers are happy to supply worms and castings to enthusiastic gardening clients. Future plans include expanding their operation into a 1,000-square foot facility and adding a greenhouse that will allow them to continue their research with compost tea and vegetables. Photos of their facility and information on vermicomposting can be found at <http://www.northtexasorganics.net>