

## **Fifth birthday for a NICE! idea in Boerne**

*Bill Ward Boerne Chapter Native Plant Society of Texas*

Operation NICE! (Natives Instead of Common Exotics!) is five years old. This program was conceived and initiated by the Boerne Chapter of the Native Plant Society of Texas. We can be flattered that by now other chapters throughout the state are implementing NICE! programs of their own. As a little retrospective to honor Operation NICE!, I am going to repeat parts of two old columns.

*The Boerne Star, March 12, 2002*

This spring the Boerne Chapter of the Native Plant Society of Texas will launch Operation NICE! (Natives Instead of the Common Exotics!). The program will encourage homeowners and nursery professionals to use more native shrubs, trees, flowers, and grasses in place of the familiar exotic plants that are routinely chosen for landscaping.

Many favorable results come from using natives instead of exotics. The most important is that native plants conserve water, the most precious natural resource in the Hill Country. They also require little or no fertilizer. Less fertilizer keeps ground water cleaner. Less watering and less fertilizing save money. Through Operation NICE!, the Boerne Chapter of the Native Plant Society of Texas (NPSOT) hopes to make this more widely appreciated.

There are other ecological benefits of growing native. Many exotic plants are harmless, but others are serious threats to our native plants and animals. The spread of exotics is now recognized as a major cause of decrease in biodiversity in the US. Exotic plants that now pose a threat include Chinese tallow, ligustrum, Chinaberry, Johnson grass and

many more. One I wish they had never imported is Bermuda grass.

Very few of us in NPSOT are purists, who turn away all exotic plants. However, a few years ago I began to supplement my yard plants with native species. I became increasingly more attracted to natives because of their drought tolerance and economical benefits. Now I never think of adding anything except natives. I have more plants, but do less watering. Also some birds and butterflies that never came to our yard before are attracted by the native plants.

Beginning in April, this column and displays at local nurseries will showcase a different native plant every month.

*The Boerne Star, November 7, 2003*

While Rebecca Rogers was President of the Boerne Chapter, she also was Kendall County Extension Agent for Family and Consumer Services.

Rogers described (a State Extension Service program called) CEMAP at the November 2001 Boerne Chapter board meeting, and immediately the board members saw possibilities for a chapter program. The particular facet of CEMAP which tweaked our interest was the part which is aimed at encouraging environmentally responsible landscaping by homeowners.

After all, the Boerne Chapter already was promoting water-conserving landscaping among its members through the monthly speaker program and by providing educational material about a different Native Plant of the Month at every chapter meeting.

Hearing about the State Extension program led us to consider how we could extend to the whole Boerne community our program of education about the

ecological and economic virtues of landscaping with native plants. And so it was that at this board meeting Operation NICE! was conceived.

The gestation period for the program was amazingly short, considering how multifaceted Operation NICE! turned out to be. The main idea was to work through local nurseries to highlight a different native plant for landscaping every month. But could we actually find retail nurseries to participate in a program to promote native plants over the common exotic landscape plants, the very ones which make their profit? In Boerne we could!

The birth announcement for Operation NICE! appeared in the second Boerne Chapter column in *The Boerne Star* published on March 12, 2002. The next day NICE! was featured in an article in *The Hill Country Recorder*. Without this generous support from both Boerne newspapers, we could reach only a small audience with our message about benefits of landscaping with native plants. The biweekly columns have proven to be effective vehicles for spreading the word. The nursery owners tell us that many of their customers are asking for the various POM after the newspaper columns appear.

The first native we selected to show off our infant Operation NICE! was Texas mountain laurel (*Sophora secundiflora*). This was POM for April 2002. The drought-resistant evergreen foliage and beautiful clusters of purple blooms were to be highlighted in both newspaper columns. Little did we know that two record freezes in early spring would make it impossible for our retail nurseries to get blooming Texas mountain laurels that month.

Other growing pains for Operation NICE! also resulted from

wholesalers' supply. Some native plants we would like to choose for POM are just not available on the commercial market. We chose blackfoot daisy (*Melampodium leucanthum*) to be POM for May, 2002, but that plant was so popular with landscapers that supplies already had sold out back in February.

It is proving to take a whole community to raise a NICE! program. Growing into a mature program will continue to require a great deal of coordination and cooperation among our NICE! squad, the participating local nurseries, and their wholesalers. However, we have a dedicated group involved in Operation NICE!, and our efforts seem to be bringing results in the Boerne community. It's worth the trouble.

Have a NICE! day!