

GARDEN DESTINATIONS

An Oasis of Wildflowers, Bats, and Outdoor Living in Austin

by Pam Penick

Patio dining, spring-fed swimming holes, a nightly bat show downtown, and rugged natural beauty make Austin a popular destination for those who love the outdoors. Located in central Texas, Austin is where the South rubs elbows with the Southwest, culturally and geographically. Tentacle-limbed live oaks spread an evergreen canopy over the city, and spiny yuccas and agaves mingle with grasses and silvery groundcovers—plants capable of enduring months of scorching heat, drought, and winters that, while brief, can dip into the 20s.

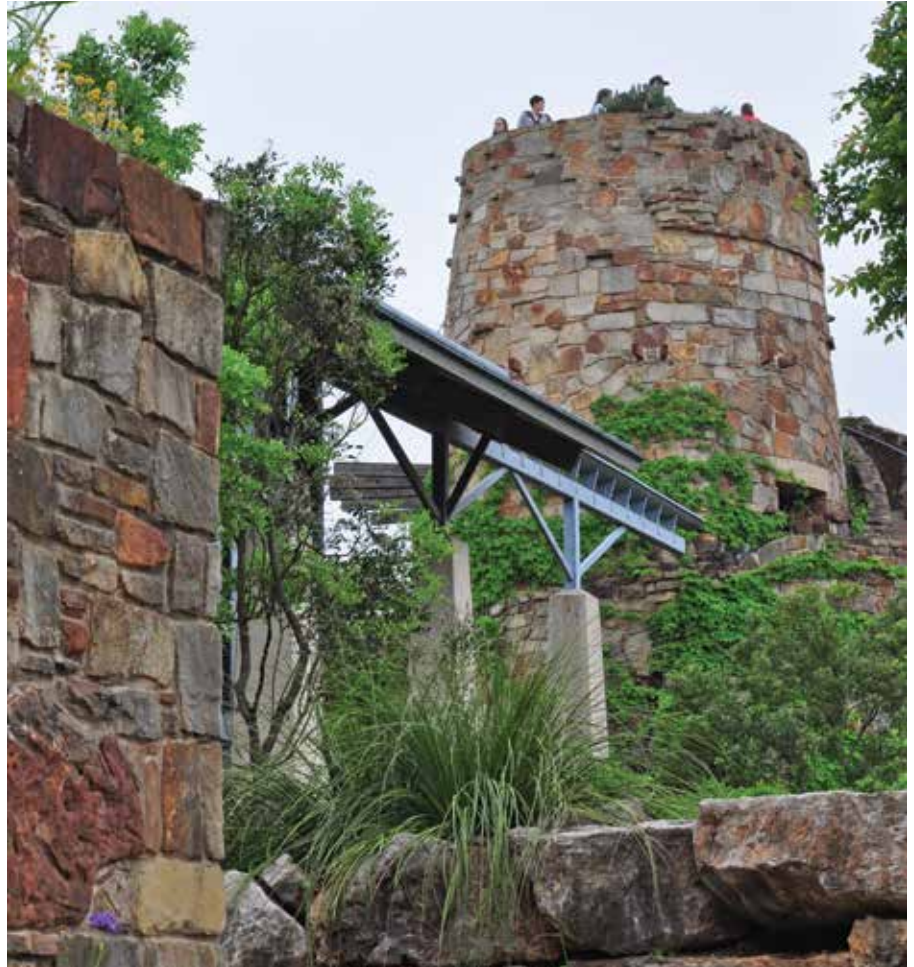
Spring and fall are ideal times to visit. The famous Texas bluebonnet turns roadsides blue (if winter rains were good) starting in mid-March and peaking in April. Other plants—in the wild and in gardens—join the rush of before-the-heat-comes flowering through May. “This is too much!” marveled Dutch plantsman Piet Oudolf during a springtime visit in the film *Five Seasons*.

Flowering tapers off but gardens remain green during our humid, subtropical summers. In early October, when fall rain arrives, oxblood lilies leap out of dormancy in flashes of red in the gardens of many older neighborhoods. Salvias, asters, mistflowers, and grasses also blaze to life through November.

When planning, keep in mind that Austin gets an influx of visitors during the South by Southwest® (SXSW®) film and music festival in March and the Austin City Limits Music Festival in October. Choosing non-festival dates helps with lodging/dining options, or stay outside of downtown.

GARDENS AND NATURE

The **Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center** exclusively showcases all kinds of native Texas plants. Its 284 acres include a variety of cultivated gardens and a savanna meadow. Climb the landmark



Left: Texas bluebonnets and Indian paintbrush signal springtime at Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center. **Above:** The rain-collection cistern doubles as an observation tower.

spiral observation tower for a 360-degree view; on the way up, notice that you’re inside a rain-collection cistern. Stroll the 1-mile-loop Arboretum trail to enjoy swings for all ages in the Cathedral of Oaks. wildflower.org.

Step back in time in the Hartman Prehistoric Garden at **Zilker Botanical Garden**, lush with palms, ferns, cy-

cads, magnolias, and ginkgos—plants from the age of dinosaurs. The compact 28-acre garden near downtown also has a Japanese garden, rose garden, and cactus/succulent garden. zilkergarden.org.

Mueller's Southwest Greenway, on the site of a now-vanished airport in east Austin, contains a 31-acre restored native prairie with trails and a gigantic steel spider by artist Dixie Friend Gay. Other parks, a children's museum, and a Sunday morning farmers market can be enjoyed at Mueller, too. muelleraustin.com.

Explore 10 miles of trails on the **Butler Hike-and-Bike Trail** along Lady Bird Lake, a reservoir on the Colorado River flowing through town. The 3.1-mile loop between MoPac/Loop 1 and Pfluger Pedestrian Bridge offers a scenic view of downtown. austintexas.gov/department/ann-and-roy-butler-hike-and-bike-trail-and-boardwalk-lady-bird-lake.

Barton Springs Pool, a 3-acre, spring-fed swimming pool, home to fish and endangered salamanders, is known as the soul of Austin. Locals flock here all summer to cool off in deliciously shivery 68-to-70-degree water, but it's open year round. austintexas.gov/department/barton-springs-pool.

When a colony of Mexican free-tailed bats took up residence under downtown's



This giant spider sculpture dominates Mueller's Southwest Greenway.

Congress Avenue Bridge, Austin embraced them as its mosquito-eating mascot. From April to October, stand on the northeast side of the bridge before sunset (arrive early to snag a good spot) and watch bats stream out in a black ribbon over **Lady Bird Lake**. Or take a sunset bat-watching cruise. In late summer, when pups start flying with their mothers, over a million bats may be seen.

GET YOUR PLANT FIX

Independent nurseries and plant shops

GET OUT OF TOWN

WEST: Explore the scenic Hill Country on US-290 W, where dozens of wineries let you sample Texas wines. In picturesque Fredericksburg, visit **Wildseed Farms** (wildseedfarms.com) for plants, seeds, gift/food shops, and wildflower fields; the red poppies in April are dazzling. Drive 20 minutes north to hike **Enchanted Rock**, an 1,800-foot-tall dome of pink granite with spectacular views. Reserve a day pass well in advance.

EAST: The **John Fairey Garden** (jfgarden.org) in tiny Hempstead, 2 hours east, is an acclaimed garden of rare plants from Mexico, North America, and Asia. It's open on designated days between September and June. On the way back, stop in Brenham to explore the **Antique Rose Emporium's** (antiqueroseemporium.com) 8 acres of display gardens and nursery.

NORTH: If you've watched Chip and Joanna Gaines's popular home renovation show on HGTV, you'll want to visit **Magnolia** (magnolia.com), their mecca in Waco, 1.5 hours up I-35. Shop, dine, and tour the Castle, their latest fixer-upper. ■



Boaters watch Austin's colony of Mexican free-tailed bats fly overhead from Congress Avenue Bridge. The bats can also be viewed from the bridge.

flourish in and around Austin. **East Austin Succulents** (eastaustinsucculents.com) has a fun, offbeat vibe, a variety of succulents and cacti, unique containers, and playful accessories. For 30 years, **The Natural Gardener** (tngaustin.com) has been an all-organic destination nursery with 8 acres of display gardens and farm animals in southwest Austin. Design-driven **Barton Springs Nursery** (bartonspringsnursery.com) near downtown offers native and adapted plants and a tastefully curated gift shop. ■

*Pam Penick is the author of **Lawn Gone!**, **The Water-Saving Garden**, and a forthcoming book about Texas gardens, to be published by Timber Press. She lives and gardens in Austin.*