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The Prairie Gentian (Eustoma grandiflorum)

By Sheryl Kleinschmidt

The Prairie Gentian is the most recent of my wildflower discoveries and will forever remain ensconced in my memory as one of the most outstanding. In early June of this year I was driving along Highway 144 between Glen Rose and Walnut Springs.

As usual, I kept one eye on the road and another searching the rightaway for any sign of life other than the dying brown Bermuda grass so prevalent in Texas' landscape.

On down the road I went thinking how different things might look if only we could get some rain. Mile after disappointing mile I drove until a soft, lavender color caught my eye.

Thinking I could not have possibly seen what I thought I saw, I turned around at the next available spot and slowly drove back to the point of interest. Yes! Pulling my truck off the pavement, I got out and walked down to the fence line where these magnificent flowers bent to and fro in the soft breeze. Never having seen a Prairie Gentian before, I marveled at their beauty, grace and stamina. Like others of their kind, they belied all reason and grew out of some of the hardest, rockiest dirt one can imagine.

Being on a tight schedule, and without a shovel, I tried desperately to pull up one of the plants. Not going to happen, but a branch did break off which I lovingly took with me and put into water. Three weeks later, this little branch was still blooming and has given me quite an accumulation of seed.

Having the plant in my possession gave me the opportunity to study it and look it up in my Audubon field guide. Along with research on-line, I have learned that the Prairie Gentian grows in the prairies of the southwest USA. All sources say it needs some moisture, but I have since

seen it growing in Somervell, Hood and Evant Counties under extremely dry and poor conditions.

Besides lavender (the only color I've seen), the Gentian can be pink, yellow or white. It is also known as the Tulip Gentian or the Texas Bluebell. It was formerly called Lisianthus russellianus, and its seed is now being sold by nurseries for use in the home garden. The seeds are light-sensitive and therefore should be broadcast, not buried.

Since the taproot is long, the Gentian does not transplant well. However, this same taproot holds tremendous reserves of carbohydrates which allow it to recover quickly after natural disasters such as prairie fires.

The Gentians I saw were tall flowers—the tallest about 3 feet. Their five petals are waxy and gradually darken as they come together in the center. They resemble a petunia in appearance, but I find them to be more attractive. The leaves are oblong, opposite and approximately 3 inches in length.

Now that the Gentian and I have become friends, I long to see her graceful emergence along the Texas roadways early next summer. Until then, I lovingly guard her seeds, anticipating the day I may have my very own bed of Gentians.

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