

# Not Your Garden-Variety Nursery



Photos: Alex Labry

Flint Fancy and Jay Beard are the co-owners of Lone Star Nursery.

Like any good commercial organic-greenhouse operation, Lone Star Nursery has flats and flats of all the common bedding plants in various stages of production. But in addition to the “usual suspects” of vegetables, herbs, succulents, annuals and perennials, there are plants you’re not likely to readily find anywhere else — such as, ashitaba (*Angelica Keiskei*, literally “tomorrow’s leaf”), neem trees (*Azadirachta indica*), Mexican arnica (*Heterotheca inuloides* Cass.), yerba maté (*Ilex paraguariensis*), Java tea (*Orthosiphon stamineus*), yerba mansa (*Anemopsis californica*), tea tree (*Leptospermum scoparium*), yage (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) and toothache plant (*Acmella oleracea*), to name a very few of their selections.

As you might expect from such an eclectic and unexpected variety of offerings, the humans behind this undertaking are just as interesting as their plants. Jay Beard and Flint Fancy are the co-owners and life partners responsible for Lone Star Nursery, and they provide the perfect blend of native and adapted characteristics to ensure the successful growth of their business in Central Texas. Jay (a fifth-generation Austinite with serious plant-growing expertise) and Flint (a transplant from South Dakota with skills in botanicals and herbal medicine) refer to themselves as “plant pirates.” To be clear, they do not mean pirates in the sense of high-seas thieves or illegal downloaders, but rather as explorers and adventurers who think outside the box, unafraid to travel in uncharted waters or weather stormy seas.

And they’ve certainly had their fair share of stormy seas to weather: the COVID-19 pandemic completely upended their business model and caused them to change course in a dramatic pivot. From 2012 to 2020, theirs was a thriving wholesale operation selling to nurseries in Houston, San Antonio, Austin, Round Rock, Pflugerville, Georgetown and most surrounding communities. Suddenly, just as the spring gardening season was about to begin and their greenhouses were jampacked with plants, their wholesale customers started cancelling orders. Jay and Flint had to send their employees home, not knowing what the future held for the business.

With the help of tech-savvy friends, they quickly reached out to the area community via social media with the news that Lone Star Nursery’s plants could be purchased by the public directly via email with contactless free delivery. “Within three days, our emails were

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overflowing with requests, questions, needs and, above all, very appreciative folks looking to maintain their gardens,” said Flint. The email format was quickly replaced by an online ordering website.

“Almost overnight we went from serving eight to ten wholesale buyers a week to an average of 250 retail customers,” added Jay. “Now we have thousands of individual customers, and their number continues to grow. The response has been huge.”

Over the years, Lone Star Nursery has built a good reputation as one of the few certified organic growers that germinates and/or propagates all its stock onsite, their renown bolstered by several appearances on the popular PBS television show, *Central Texas Gardener*. In addition to being recognized for high-quality vegetable and landscape plants, Lone Star Nursery has become known as the place to go if someone is looking for an unusual plant or a medicinal herb.

It wasn't always that way. Although Jay grew up helping his mother garden, he says that the first time a plant really made an impression on him was when his great-grandmother died. Then he took home one of her plants to care for it. He killed it. Or at least he thought he

did, but when he saw a green shoot poking up out of the soil and the plant came back, he was intrigued. Intrigue morphed into passion, and he started collecting plants and propagating them.

Relationships and living quarters came and went, but the plants remained and just kept multiplying. When plants started taking over every available space in the house, a friend (who Jay calls his “plant mentor”) gently suggested that he needed to get rid of some of them. Jay first started selling plants from his East Austin yard in 2002. He learned about seeding and built a makeshift greenhouse out of found materials in his backyard with the help of his brother, Aaron. Being able to produce many transplants of popular items (such as tomatoes and basil) led him to branch out to farmers markets. It was there that he met Flint.

Flint moved to Austin in 1999 after spending part of her youth hopping freight trains and hitchhiking around the country playing percussion in punk bands. A serious illness that did not respond to conventional treatment led her to embrace Chinese herbal medicine. “This progressed into a passion for western herbalism, natural birth and, eventually,

growing all medicine for my venture, ‘Age of Flint Apothecary,’ now known as Lone Star Medicinals/Botanicals,” she explained. She began selling her products at the same farmers markets where Jay was marketing his plants. In 2006, they joined forces, both business-wise and life-wise. They continued participating in farmers markets for some years, ultimately making enough contacts to grow their business into wholesale-only, with top-tier nurseries as customers. Having outgrown their East Austin backyard, in 2016 they moved to 10 acres outside of Manor and started from scratch with new greenhouses and more staff.

This is probably a good point in the story to point out that Lone Star Nursery is a family affair and has been from the get-go. Jay's mother, Brenda, has backed the enterprise from its inception, both financially and with mama boots-on-the-ground, the sort of support that cannot be overstated. Jay's grandfather, PawPaw George, provided his old horse trailer to haul plants to farmers markets until box trucks and pickups could be purchased. Great Aunt Lois is a regular volunteer. Jay's father and brother also lend a hand. All five of the couple's children are involved in the day-to-day operations of the nursery, from transplanting, organizing, building structures, making deliveries and creating online content and videos. To continue the pirate analogy, it's all-hands-on-deck at Lone Star Nursery.

The old saying, “It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good,” might apply to Lone Star Nursery's situation. While Jay and Flint would hardly have thought so, back in the spring of 2020, when their business disappeared practically overnight, it turned out that going from a wholesale-only model to customer-direct sales has been a boon for their company. And despite the change in selling method, their core operating values have remained constant. One of their taglines is: “We grow everything we sell onsite, from seed to sale!” They prep their soil with mycorrhizae and steep their water with yucca extract and seaweed. Seed and plant stock are handled only in compliance with USDA-certification-program guidelines. They provide a friendly, laidback customer experience that nevertheless does not compromise their deep knowledge of plants and herbal usage. It's a winning model, no matter how it is carried out, and it seems as though no matter what obstacles are thrown in their path, these plant pirates will batten down the hatches and sail on. **16**

*Plants can be ordered from the Lone Star Nursery website: <https://lonestarnursery.com>. They offer free delivery within 45 miles of their greenhouses in Manor with a \$30 minimum order. Onsite pickup is always available.*

An uncommon red-stemmed Mexican epazote is among the hard-to-find plants on offer at Lone Star Nursery.



Above, top: Brenda Beard, Jay's mother, has backed the enterprise from its inception, both financially and with mama boots-on-the-ground.

Above, bottom: Like any good commercial, organic greenhouse operation, Lone Star Nursery has flats and flats of all the common bedding plants in various stages of production.