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## Sandhill plum idea jells for inn owner

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STAFFORD COUNTY — When the car finally rolls to a dusty stop along sandhills and prairie grass, and the engine is turned off — the sounds can be intimidating.

Nothing but the katydids and quail.

No human for miles.

But the sight of hundreds of ripening sandhill plums is what Wichita Realtor Clare Moore is banking on to help draw visitors into his home county.

"People's comments once they come here is that it is so quiet," Moore said. "It is just Kansas nature. They just want to experience it. I had this one couple last June from France who were out here and they were so enamored."

Moore owns and operates the Henderson House Inn and Retreat Center in Stafford, about an hour's drive northwest of Wichita.

During the slow months of July and August he's hoping to attract visitors by offering a once-common experience — making jelly from a bumper crop of wild sandhill plums.

As he talks, his voice is punctuated by the sounds of handfuls of plums dropping with a rolling thud into a gallon coffee can.

"If you've never picked them before, you just reach in underneath and kind of pull from underneath," he said. "You go by color. If they are red, that means they are ripe. I even pick some that may not be ripe enough but it all cooks down and makes gorgeous juice."

Stafford is where Moore grew up and was a 4-H'er. Wichita is where he went to college and later where he started his realty business, Claremont Realty, which eventually branched back to Stafford.

In Stafford, the Henderson House Inn and Retreat Center is a collection of five Victorian-era houses and a historic church, all on one block.

Because the community is near Quivira National Wildlife Refuge, birders and hunters traditionally fill the rooms during the fall and spring months when birds are abundant.

But July and August are often the slowest months, Moore said.

So this year, in the midst of a bumper crop of sandhill plums, he decided to offer visitors who stay at his bed and breakfast a guided experience of taking them out along the back roads to where the plums grow wild, help them pick and bring the tiny fruits back to the bed and breakfast where they can make their own jelly in a Victorian kitchen.

Moore and local photographer Jerry Segraves will help guide guests through the jelly making process. The whole process takes about three hours from picking to finished product.

The idea came to him after attending a meeting earlier this summer promoting the communities for the Wetlands and Wildlife Scenic Byway. A national consultant told participants to look for different ways they could provide experiences to visitors.

On good years — like this one, the plums will come in waves.

"There are all kinds of varieties," Moore said. "There are some that are kind of yellow; some, real tiny, and some, just like these. They are all native and grow out here."

On other years — due to late frosts, there may be no plums on the prairie.

Never mind those years, the men have picked a hearty supply of plums to freeze into juice for future use. This year's season will be over in a few more weeks.

### The art of jelly making

Both men learned jelly making skills from their grandmothers.

The plums are poured into a pot and submerged in an inch of water. They simmer for about an hour, 15 minutes at a rolling boil.

A couple of strainings and a potato masher later separate the seeds away from the juice.

The juice is put back on the stove and sugar is added.

And not much later, visitors can decide how they want their labels to read on the jars of jelly.

Segraves takes a whisk and stirs as the juices and sugar meld.

"I found by experience not to stir too much. The more you stir it, the more it agitates the foam," Segraves said. "Sometimes I add a pinch of cinnamon to add flavor... If you don't quite have enough juice you can sneak in a half cup of apple juice to bring it up to 11 cups."

The jelly can take a few days to set up and then can be eaten on toast and biscuits — or, if it fails to jell, can be used as syrup and go on ice cream, pancakes and waffles, Segraves said.

"To me, it symbolizes the flavor of the prairie," he said. "When you hear about America the beautiful across fruited plain, well we are living on it."

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