

Farming to sooth the soul: the sweet touch of lavender

by RONDA PAYNE

LANGLEY – Thinking of lavender can conjure up the romantic vision of girls in floppy hats strolling with their baskets to check the blossoms. In reality, the growing lavender industry is still romantic, but there is a lot of work to be done despite the forgiving nature of the plants.

Lavender, as a crop, began to take off in B.C. about 10 years ago. We now have approximately 30 lavender farms across the province. Most farms are small, in the range of one to ten acres planted, and are no where near the size of the more industrial farms that have existed for centuries in France and England.

"It is unlikely that we will ever see the 200 acre farms common in other countries, given the precious nature of our land," says Soheil Mahmoud, an assistant professor at UBC Okanagan. Mahmoud is highly involved in the industry through the British Columbia Lavender Network.

While their size can't compete on an international level, the product of these local farms certainly can, with their excellent range of quality. The question then remains: how do lavender farmers survive if they

farm on such a small scale?

They diversify. From on-site retreats and product sales to aromatherapy sessions and bed and breakfasts, lavender farmers haven't just diversified, they've expanded the romance of the lavender.

English Lavender most common

There are more than 39 species of lavender with 400-plus varieties within those species. A producer's choice of plants will depend upon the type of land available and the desired use for the plants. The most common types in B.C. are in the *Angustifolia* species; *Hidcote* and *Munstead* are the usual varieties chosen and are commonly called English Lavender. *Lavandin*, a hybrid, is also a common choice.

"You must diversify," notes Robyn Wyman, registered aromatherapist and part owner of Full Bloom Farm in Langley. "You can't just grow lavender; you need to add things to grow."

Seldom is lavender grown directly with other crops, though each farm seems to have its own vision for expanding the romance of lavender into other areas of their land.

Full Bloom Farm features an



Partner of Full Bloom Farm in Langley B.C., Robyn Wyman is found enjoying the scenery of the 'still sleeping' lavender plants. (Ronda Payne photo)

herb garden to provide other aromatherapy sources and a focus on the educational, relaxation and sensory experience that can be tied to lavender.

At just more than 13 acres, Damali Lavender Farm of Cobble Hill offers a bed and breakfast, small vineyard, a fig orchard and a winery/vinegry where they will make lavender infused wine vinegars.

Sacred Mountain Lavender on Salt Spring Island offers equine-guided personal development on their site.

Needs sandy, drained soil

A rather hearty plant, lavender seems like the ideal crop. It doesn't like to stay wet, doesn't experience many pests or

pathogens (though there can be fungal issues in a damper climate), grows well in sandy, well draining soil, doesn't want to be fussed about, pruning (although thought to extend the plants' useful life) isn't necessary, loves full sun and there are varieties suitable for nearly any farm.

The plants grow large, requiring up to approximately one

square metre each and reach maximum productivity two to three years after planting. After eight years, the "mound-shaped" plants become woody, flower production is likely to decrease and the plant may die, signaling the time to replant.

"The plants are very forgiv-

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Let's grow together

I am pleased to announce that Lana Dueck has joined our BMO Agricultural Team. Lana comes to us to work with our agricultural clients in the Fraser Valley, helping them meet their financial goals for their farms and families. Lana has had many years experience in the industry, and has a passionate commitment to serving the agricultural community in BC. Lana has served on many agricultural and community related committees throughout her professional career, and remains committed to helping farm families find the right financial solutions.

LANA DUECK
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Lana currently resides in Chilliwack, and will be based in our new Abbotsford Main Branch, which will be opening in just a few weeks. She welcomes your call at 604-504-4647 or 604-751-3405 (cell). Email: lana.dueck@bmo.com.

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Lavender is labour intensive, with all work done by hand

ing," explains Damali Lavender Farm partner Alison Philp. "Though, in our major planting in the second year, we lost about 2,000 plants, because the soil is different there - it's more clay based - so we had to move the survivors, which was a major project. That was our big learning curve - it (lavender) doesn't like clay! Back then, we were just learning, now, we know better, of course."

In spite of all its heartiness, lavender does come with a downside as a crop. It is incredibly labour intensive and all the work is done by hand. Because the plants will be harvested at

different times due to their variety and use, harvest can take a significant period of time.

"It's nice being able to stagger the harvests," says Philp. "Flowers for drying are ready pretty much when the bees arrive, at about two-thirds of an open bloom. Then, you want them to be fully bloomed when you harvest for essential oil."

Filled, emptied six times

As explained by Wyman, when flowers are harvested, the stalks are cut by hand with sickles, then they are bundled and hung in a drying shed. The shed at Full Bloom Farm was filled

and emptied six times for the 2009 harvest.

Philp notes the farm must be set up in a way that is manageable. Even with her two partners, Philp points out the 12,000 plants on their farm are too much for the three of them to handle. One of the methods they've used to deal with the workload is utilizing World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF). WWOOFers are volunteer workers from a variety of countries that work at a host farm for a period of time. At Damali Lavender Farm, WWOOFers help with harvest, trimming, clean up and even weeding and pruning in the spring.

"This program has been huge for us," says Philp.

Once harvested, a variety of products are produced and sold. Body care products like soaps, shampoos, creams and massage oils are very popular.

Strong growth is being seen in the culinary area with a demand from chefs for high quality lavender to be included in their dishes. Prepared food items like teas, honeys and jams are also frequently offered.

Products that are enjoyed primarily for their fragrance are also popular, like sachets, foot soaks and comfort bags. Then, of

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VI climate suited to cider production

use short, fat vats and tall skinny ones depending on how they want to dissipate the heat. The fat vats are used later in the fermentation process in late October and early November.

"We don't use any water jackets or anything to control the temperature - we use yeast," explains Pipes.

The cider ferments for 12-20 weeks.

"That way, the slower the fermentation goes, the more of your fruity bouquet you retain," says Pipes. "The slower, lower-temperature fermentation gives you a nice aroma. We're lucky; basically the environment is a perfect moderate environment. We have no frost protection on the trees and don't need cooling jackets on the fermenters. We don't have to intervene a lot here."

Pipes and Docherty use plastic packaging for their cider.

"Packaging is really important; however, packaging when it comes to wine, cider and beer is also a compromise," says Pipes. "To package it, you have to stabilize it. As a living product, it referments in the bottle, and carbon dioxide can explode in a glass bottle. Any product that referments, we put in a clear plastic bottle. The plastic packaging is a nice compromise but is not a great selling tool.

"We started hand-selling; people who know our product know why we use it."

course, there is the distilled essential oil. The options are endless.

Starter plants for sale

Joanne Stuart, store and production manager at Sacred Mountain Lavender, points out they even sell starter plants taken from cuttings. Like most lavender farms, the majority of the products are made on site at Sacred Mountain Lavender and

sold in the on-site shop. Some producers also sell their products to natural food retailers and gift stores.

"There is huge demand for these products," notes Mahmood. "This is where the potential lies for the industry - in creating a B.C. brand and beginning to export the products."

Funding for the exploration and growth of the lavender industry exists, like the current "Improving the Lavender Industry in B.C." project funded by the Investment Agriculture Foundation of B.C. This project intends to assist in producing improved lines of lavender as well as identifying new applications for lavender oil.

B.C. lavender farmers believe the future looks great for the crop given healthy agri-tourism, growth in new products and establishment of long-term markets. Plus, there seems to be a small network of sharing taking root in the industry, allowing farms to share equipment, experiences and ideas.

Memories evoked

"I can't see why it wouldn't progress," comments Stuart. "People are touched by (lavender) and it seems to evoke memories. It's an incredible healing plant and cooking is really making inroads that it wasn't before. The industry is really starting to grow."

A number of lavender events are coming up in the spring including a B.C. Essential Oils workshop in Victoria May 10. For more information visit the B.C. Lavender Network website at [www.bclavendernet.ca].

Many lavender farms offer their own festivals in the peak of blooming season, including the three farms noted. Check their websites for more information on upcoming events and visiting hours.

Stopping to smell the roses is one thing, but to truly appreciate farming and the efforts behind it, these folks stop and smell the lavender.



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