

How his garden grows: A hostile climate didn't stop Pierre Pellerin from planting lavender. His choice is paying off

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Pierre Pellerin let his hand brush over the top of his lavender plants, gently touching the blue flowers, and making them sway under the morning sun warming the town of Fitch Bay.

"These are blooming. They'll be cut for extraction soon, probably starting Saturday," he said.

It's not an unusual sight to see a farmer tending to his crops in the Eastern Townships, but it's Pellerin's crop that makes him a true pioneer in these parts.

"When I first approached the Quebec Department of Agriculture about growing lavender here, they laughed, and said nobody had ever done it before," said Pellerin, 50.

"They told me I was crazy!"

Quebec's cold, unpredictable winters made the prospect of growing a crop as particular about its environment as lavender virtually impossible.

That was in 1999.

Fast forward to the summer of 2005 and Pellerin now has 100,000 healthy lavender plants and a booming lavender merchandise business to his name.

But the road to success has been a rocky one.

Originally an engineer, Pellerin sold his electrical business in 1998. Two weeks later, he bought the 105 hectares of land where the Domaine Bleu Lavande now stands, about 120 kilometres southeast of Montreal.

"I'm from Magog and I used to bike by this land when I was younger," he said, looking out over the green and blue fields. "I thought, 'I hope one day I have money to buy this place.' "

Pellerin set about clearing the land and sowing plants. He had a house and the distillation building - where the lavender oil and floral water he sells are extracted - built out of wood from his forest.

Pellerin decided to grow lavender for two reasons: He'd been told he couldn't do it, and he'd travelled to France and other countries where lavender was grown. He said he discovered its appeal early on.

"Ask any woman what they think of lavender and they'll say, 'Oh. I love it. I want to touch it, smell it,' " he said. "It also helps relax and relieve stress."

The groundwork was laid, but then disaster struck.

By the spring of 2001, Pellerin had lost 50,000 of the 60,000 plants he had put in the ground because of an unusually warm winter with little snow to insulate the growths.

"That's when I started remembering the people who told me I was crazy to try to grow the stuff," he said.

Slightly in despair, Pellerin happened to drive by a strawberry field nearby and noticed something he'd never seen before.

"The farmer had straw all over his rows of plants. I asked him why he did it and he told me it was to insulate the plants.

"When I asked him if he thought it work for lavender, he said, 'Lalala what?' and laughed."

The straw worked, and once Pellerin fine-tuned the rest of the tricky business of growing lavender in an unforgiving climate, he opened his farm to the public in June 2004. "We had 30,000 people in 28 days," he said.

With lavender's appeal - if the manure spread across farmers' fields is at one end of the olfactory spectrum, then lavender is definitely at the other - and Pellerin's business savvy, Domaine Bleu Lavande is now one of the biggest tourist attractions in the region.

"We are one of two certified lavender producers in North America," Pellerin said. "The other one is a Mormon family in Salt Lake City."

Pellerin and his 24 employees grow two types of lavender, True Munstead and True England. The plants come from a laboratory in Australia - the world leader in lavender production - that certifies they are genetically pure.

"It's like making wine. When you want to make Merlot or Pinot, you don't go to the Canadian Tire nursery for your vines," he said.

Once the plants' blooming season is over, typically at the end of July for the Munstead and mid-August for the England, they are cut by machine and their oils are extracted.

"It takes about 500 kilograms of plants to make two litres of oil and 60 to 80 litres of floral water," he said.

Visitors to the site can view two distillations a day - one in the morning, and one in the afternoon.

"The smell when you take the lid off the vat is incredible," Pellerin said.

It was enough to draw Louise Paquette, a lavender fancier from Sherbrooke.

"The smell is so good I bought a plant and some incense for the house," she said.

"It's going to smell like lavender everywhere."

Pellerin said the farm's focus is quality, not production.

"I'm much more relaxed now. Maybe it's from working around lavender all day," he said.

All the same, Pellerin plans to eventually cultivate 500,000 plants on his land.

"That will make us the largest producer in North America - unless the Mormons expand, too!"

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Illustration:

• Colour Photo: PIERRE OBENDRAUF, THE GAZETTE / If manure is at one end of olfactory spectrum, lavender must be the other, as Danielle Chenevert experienced as she strolled the Bleu Lavande fields yesterday.

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