

The Gazette

After trial and error, fields of lavender: Ex-Inventor's approach of try, try, try again finally yields sea of purple in an unlikely spot

Montreal Gazette
Saturday, August 7, 2004
Page: G8
Section: Weekend: Life
Byline: Helga Loveseed
Source: Freelance

Lavender, it is said, relaxes the body, relieves muscle tension and evokes feelings of calmness, the perfect remedy for stressed-out urbanites.

The heady scent at Blue Lavande, a lavender farm near Fitch Bay, certainly seems to confirm those claims. Around the 250-acre spread, which sits atop Applegrove Hill, lie neat rows of purple shrubs. In the distance, rolling hills as far as the eye can see - not quite Provence, but the closest thing to it in a corner of the Eastern Townships.

Bleu Lavande opened in mid-July, and is an agritourism attraction where visitors can spend a couple of hours learning about lavender and how to grow it, from inventor-turned-farmer Pierre Pellerin.

"I knew that, in the beginning, cultivating lavender would be as much of a challenge as producing wine," says Pellerin.

"Many people thought that would making wine in the Eastern Townships would be impossible, too, but look how many wineries we've got in the region."

Not one to give up easily, Pellerin spent five years experimenting with soils and plants before finding the right combination.

He has 25,000 lavender plants on five acres, but at one point, he lost 50,000 shrubs. Pellerin persevered, travelling to lavender-growing regions in Provence and California, talking to farmers and gathering information.

Now he dispenses advice to others who want to grow the fragrant, health-inducing plant.

Pellerin gives guided tours and afterwards visitors can enjoy a picnic amid the lavender fields, revelling in the picturesque views, while inhaling the perfume from the pretty, purple flowers.

There are picnic tables scattered around the grounds and if you can't be bothered lugging food from the city, another nearby agritourism establishment - Les Toits Bleus, a "table champetre" - a farm that serves country fare - will prepare regional specialties and deliver them to the farm. (You need to make a reservation 24 hours in advance.)

On the day that I was there, the place was packed. People were lining up to talk to Pellerin, clamouring for advice on how to grow lavender, which, as he quickly pointed out, is not easy to grow in our cool climate.

Lavender has to be pollinated and to help the process along, Pellerin has installed 35 bee hives on his farm. (He also wants to produce lavender honey.)

Unfortunately, a black bear recently raided three of his hives, so he has had to move them to another spot where the public won't be endangered. It has also curtailed Pellerin's plans to offer tractor rides around the property - at least for the time being.

In the meantime, day trippers can wander around the lavender fields or pop into the small boutique in the barn, where there are lavender-themed gifts for sale.

Pellerin's entire family is involved in Bleu Lavande and last Sunday, his wife and daughter were gamely trying to keep up with the line-up of customers snaking around the tiny store. Not only were visitors buying armfuls of lavender produce - soap, essential oils, face cream, bouquets of dried lavender and the like - they were excitedly sniffing their purchases, discussing where they were going to plant their newly purchased blooms.

PIERRE PELLERIN'S TIPS FOR GROWING LAVENDER

If you want to grow lavender yourself, take advice from someone who knows, Pierre Pellerin:

1. Choose a sunny, dry spot with sandy or gravelly soil that offers good drainage.
2. Prepare the lavender bed by creating a furrow or mound. (This, too, helps to drain the soil.)
3. During the first year, don't let the lavender bloom. Keep snipping off the tips of the young plant and fashion it into a ball-shaped shrub.
4. In the fall, cover the shrub with straw or pine branches (not burlap or anything heavy that could weigh it down).
5. The following spring (mid-April) remove the protective cover and allow the lavender to bloom. It will flower until late August/early September and should last for at least 10 years.

Illustration:

- Color Photo: HELGA LOVERSEED THE GAZETTE / Pierre Pellerin has 25,000 plants today, but he lost 50,000 in the learning process. The farm is open to visitors who want to learn about lavender or just inhale the deep scent.
- MAP: THE GAZETTE / Bleu Lavande is 144 kilometres from Montreal. Take the Eastern Townships Autoroute (10) to Magog and get off at Exit 118. Drive through town, then follow route 247 south (direction Georgeville) to Fitch Bay. Just beyond Fitch Bay, you'll see a covered bridge on the right hand side. Continue up Applegrove Hill to the farm (it is signposted) at 891 Narrow Rd. Bleu Lavande is open Wednesday to Sunday until Labour Day weekend. Opening hours are 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Call (819) 876-5851.

Idnumber: 200408070044

Edition: Final

Story Type: Profile

Note: Profile of Pierre Pellerin

Length: 656 words

Illustration Type: Colour Photo Map