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French floral masterpiece thrives in Quebec

A former engineer coaxes Provence's famed blue lavender to flourish in inhospitable Eastern Townships

ALEX DOBROTA

FITCH BAY, QUE. -- Pierre Pellerin was not a man to believe fairy tales. Neither was his native province of Quebec a land to welcome lavender, the scented plant that conjures images of sun-basking southern France.

All this changed in 1999, when Mr. Pellerin, an electrical engineer by trade, visited the balmy fields of Provence and fell under the spell of *Lavandula*, the blue-eyed lavender fairy of legend.

Since then, Mr. Pellerin has battled Quebec's inhospitable climate and the jeers of agronomists to become his province's lavender pioneer.

Now his fragrant fields tucked among the rolling hills of the Eastern Townships hold more than 100,000 plants, which makes *Domaine Bleu lavande* the country's largest lavender farm, complete with a lavender-oil distillery and a boutique that sells dozens of beauty products, teas and foods.



In the summer, the inebriating aroma floats for kilometres. It attracts tens of thousands of visitors, who last year reportedly pumped \$2.2-million into the local economy and more than \$1-million into Mr. Pellerin's coffers. His success is also delighting many Quebecers proud to claim a cultural staple from France.

"It's magic," Mr. Pellerin says as he plucks a few of the tiny blue petals from his blooming plants and rubs them, inhaling the sweet aroma.

If legend is to be believed, *Lavandula* once cried blue tears over the arid fields of Provence, dismayed by that region's desolation. Where the droplets touched the chalky earth, lavender bushes grew. "The fairy must have cried over our fields too, because they are just as blue," Mr. Pellerin says.

Not so in 1999. Back then, the field near the village of Fitch Bay was an abandoned apple orchard. And Mr. Pellerin, the owner of a thriving electrical-engineering company, was in Provence, trying to cure a burnout crisis. "I found that place charming, a paradise," he remembers.

When he returned to Quebec, he sold his business, bought the 105-hectare field near Fitch Bay and called the Quebec Department of Agriculture for advice on how to grow lavender.

"They told me, 'Mr. Pellerin, you're crazy! This will never grow in Quebec.' "

He ignored the prediction and, over the next three years, planted 60,000 bushes. But he remembered the agronomists in 2003, when a winter without snow left the tiny plants whipped by winds. He lost 80 per cent of his crop.

"I was bawling," he says, recalling how he learned from nearby farms to protect his plants by bedding them down with straw during the winter months.

Mr. Pellerin now grows two varieties of certified lavender, which he imports from a lab in Australia: true Munstead and true lavender. Early in the fall, he harvests the crop and brews the seeds in a steel container to obtain lavender oil.

Known for its soothing effects since antiquity, lavender spread to England from France in the 1600s. In the following centuries, the plant was touted as a remedy against fleas, headaches and even the plague. It became a mainstay at the court of France and in homes in Victorian England.

In 2004, when Bleu lavande opened to the public for the first time, more than 30,000 visitors entered the farm's small boutique. Mr. Pellerin expects 60,000 this year.

"I enable people to live a dream -- seeing lavender fields without going to Provence," he says.

One such visitor is Francesco Spertini, a 64-year-old retired geologist from Asbestos, Que. As he breathed in the lavender scent, he relived the years of his youth. In the 1950s, he says, he used to hop on his scooter and travel along the Mediterranean coast from his native Milan to Nice. He would sleep in the fields by day, and ride by night.

"We were drunk on the smell," he remembers.

For others, a visit to Bleu lavande stirs nationalist sentiments.

"We are self-sufficient here in Quebec," says Louise Brisson, a 25-year-old from Rimouski, as her two friends nod in agreement. "We don't need to go to France any more."

It is said that those who linger too long in a field of lavender become lavender. Mr. Pellerin swears this has happened to him.

"I sweat lavender, I eat lavender," he says, his blue eyes lighting up.

"I am lavender."