

## The Purplest Place in California

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Purple haze, purple sage, purple mountain majesties, the color purple. I am prematurely in synch with that strong women's poem that begins "when I grow old I shall wear purple," since purple is my favorite color and I've been wearing it for years. I even have a bedroom with trim that, while the paint chip was modestly called "gray flannel," really is a deep, lovely purple.

In July, I visited the purplest place I know in California, the Mt. Shasta Lavender Farms. Set high on a slope above the tiny cow town of Montague, facing gleaming snow-capped Mt. Shasta, the rows of purple herb reflect the high-mountain sun.

In summer, when the lavender is high, the proprietors, Gail Winslow and David McGee-Williams, raise up their fanciful purple-striped tent in one of the fields, where they serve lavender lemonade and tell stories about how they came to grow the pungent plant.

The scent of lavender is prized for its calming quality. My yoga teacher begins each class by spritzing the air with a mixture of lavender oil and water. A dab of lavender oil on each temple can relax one back to sleep in the middle of the night. And, of course, sachets filled with lavender buds have scented lingerie drawers since Victorian times.

Years ago, Gail and David acquired their acreage on a rocky hillside in Siskiyou County. The soil didn't exactly cry out for cultivation; it was dry in the summer and swept by snow and wind in winter. It was very cheap.

They studied for years to determine how this rough and apparently useless land might become productive. They finally researched lavender and traveled to the Provence region of France to learn about its cultivation. Requiring little water; thriving where even summer nights are cold; preferring poor, sandy soil and reaching maturity rapidly in a short growing season, lavender seemed like the perfect crop for them.

They returned home and observed their land. How long were the growing days? What was the composition of their soil? Where did the sun hit and for how many hours? How did the soil drain?

Finally, they took the plunge, planting both Spanish and French lavender. In the end, they had to scrape off much of the topsoil on their hillside, because it was too rocky, and add better soil. By

the same token, they discovered that the property has a source of naturally carbonated water upon which lavender plants apparently thrive.

Each spring, Gail and David harvest the new lavender buds at their prime, when they are fullest of the strong scented oil. They take them to an old distillery nearby, originally built to produce alcoholic spirits, and have them steam-distilled to extract the lavender oil. They sell their oil commercially in bulk as scent for soap and shampoo. For a very short time each spring – because it sells out almost instantly – one can buy the pure oil directly from the farm in small blue bottles.

Beginning in July, the owners open the fields for visitors to cut their own lavender. When you arrive, Gail, somewhere north of 50, a trim blonde, windblown in her straw hat, welcomes you with a basket, a pair of scissors and a few rubber bands. Each handful of lavender stalks, snipped and rubber-banded, costs a few dollars. A double handful of lavender stalks in an old pitcher on a dresser gives a room a wonderful scent.

The proprietors are still in that stage where, if you ask them whether they are "making it" financially with their lavender business, they shrug their shoulders with a sporting grin and say "maybe someday." It's not for lack of promoting their product. Slowly, their lavender buds, watercolor cards of their fields and recipes for everything lavender have begun to crop up in tearooms, bookstores and gift shops around the region.

It's heartening to know that, even as growing population and urban sprawl consume our traditional agricultural land in California, people like Gail and David are starting new projects, turning marginal land into productive and sustainable agriculture. Their neighbors around Montague include a fledgling vineyard and a company that makes all-natural mattresses from organic sheep's wool they produce locally.

I hope Gail and David make it with their lavender farm. Meanwhile, I can't think of a more heavenly experience than the pungent smell as I tramp between the rows to cut my lavender and enjoy the view of Mt. Shasta.

Ah, summertime! Ω



Photo courtesy of Mt. Shasta Lavender Farms