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Lavender Grower Advises Prospective Farmers Seeking Profits

Clara Vaughn, Va. Correspondent Sep 8, 2017 Updated Sep 8, 2017



Photo by Clara Vaughn Ellen Reynolds, of Beagle Ridge Farm in Wytheville, Virginia, grows less than an acre of lavender, but produces soaps, lotions, spice mixes and other value-added products on site with her lavender. "Anything value-added really takes your return up," said the long-time grower of the fragrant herb.

MACHIPONGO, Va. — Ellen Reynolds has grown lavender on her Beagle Ridge Farm, in the southwestern Virginia town of Wytheville, for more than 15 years.

Though the farm tops 150 acres, she devotes less than an acre to the fragrant, purple flowers that are fast gaining popularity as a staple on small-scale farms and as a side-crop for larger operations.

"Anything value-added really takes your return up," said Reynolds, who uses lavender to create spice mixes, soaps, lotions and other value-added products.

Nearly 50 people attended her Aug. 22 workshop at the Barrier Islands Center, on Virginia's Eastern Shore, to learn more about growing, planting and harvesting lavender.

"It's a plant that thrives on neglect," said Reynolds, who grows more than a dozen varieties of the herb.

In addition to well-draining soil — Reynolds likes to plant her lavender in mounds to encourage drainage — the plants need at least six hours of sunlight daily and a slightly alkaline soil with a pH of around 6.5.

Lavender doesn't require irrigation and is prone to fungal disease, so it needs loose soil with large particles and plenty of air circulation, she said.

To propagate lavender, Reynolds uses cuttings, though growers can also purchase plugs from local nurseries.

The varieties growers choose are key, she said, because different value-added products require different types of lavender.

"Before they start whatever they're going to do with lavender, they need to know what the final use of the plant is going to be," Reynolds told prospective growers.

Lavandins, such as Grosso and Provence, are fast-growing cross-breeds that produce the highest quantities of oil, for example.

These varieties are famous in the fields of France and "what everybody seems to want," Reynolds said, but she advises new farmers to steer clear of essential oils.

That's because it takes a 10-cubic-foot roomful of lavender to make one liter of oil.

"If you want to do oil only, you're going to have to grow tons of lavender," Reynolds said. "If you're going to grow that much lavender, you will get better returns making sachets and pillows."

From eye pillows and neck rolls to mug mats, helmet liners, dryer bags, soaps, lotions, bath bombs and body scrubs, lavender goes into a host of value-added products.

Customers also buy dried bunches of the herb and some vendors in upscale markets even sell flowerless bundles as fragrant fire-starters, Reynolds said.

"If you can take it to a big city, it's a novelty, and you can get a bigger price," she said.

Florists seek out the purple flowers for wedding bouquets, and lavender can also make delicious rubs for meats or flavorful additions to sweets.

Some farmers do pick-your-own lavender days where customers can pay by-the-bunch to harvest handfuls of the flowers from their farmers, too.

Depending on the amount of lavender they produce, farmers can either use their own labor to harvest it and make value-added products, or outsource some of the work, Reynolds said.

“There are processors, but it depends on how much you’re going to be growing and what you’re going to be doing with it. If you just want it for buds and sachets ... you can probably do it yourself,” she said.

She said labor costs on her farm are “very minimal” because her husband, Gregg Reynolds, harvests their 1,080 linear feet of lavender. They only need one summer worker to help process the buds, which get dried in well-ventilated spaces.

“You don’t need a lot of equipment. You don’t need a tractor,” Ellen Reynolds said.

Soaps and lotions are her most profitable products, and for good reason.

“Everybody wants to smell good, but they want to feel good, too. It’s a feel-good product, and if they enjoy that and it feels good then they will be glad to put the investment into it,” she said of her customers.

Because it takes at least three years from planting to generating a steady supply of value-added products, Reynolds advised prospective growers to avoid going into debt to start their lavender business.

She said farmers should also ask themselves questions such as, “Do (I) want to do farmers markets?” and “Do (I) want to deal with people, where (I) have them come on-site?”

She recommends that interested farmers visit lavender farms, volunteer on them, and grow test plots before diving into the business.

The most important part of starting a lavender farm, though, is choosing the right variety of the plant to grow.

“The (farmer) has to know what their desire, their want, is,” Reynolds said, “rather than saying, ‘Oh, there’s a market for this. I’ll make this.’ That’s not going to be a sustainable business model.”

She told interested farmers to visit her website at www.beagleridgeherbfarm.com to learn more about her farm and business and www.lavenderthymetrail.com to learn about the Lavender Trail she is developing and expanding.

For more resources on growing lavender, Reynolds also suggested the U.S. Lavender Growers Association website at www.uslavender.org. The association was started in 2011 by lavender growers and crafters.

The August lavender workshop was sponsored by Future Harvest Chesapeake Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture and Eastern Shore Resource Conservation and Development Council.

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