



# Blissful Blooms

Lavender has many devotees—ranging from grandmothers to punk rockers—and of course has many uses. The floral scent is soothing, the cut flowers are pretty, and you can cook with it. At Seven Oaks Farm in Fauquier, Edith and Deborah Williamson grow lavender, sell lavender-based products and engage in “lavender craziness.” By PAULA STEERS BROWN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHARD ROBINSON





Lavender dries inside.

**Edith and Deborah Williamson,** mother-daughter proprietors of Seven Oaks Lavender Farm in picturesque Fauquier County, must have been fated for their lavender fields, since Debbie was born in France while her father Glenn was stationed near Bordeaux. Married military men were allowed to have their wives on base, but those spots were filled with the higher-ranking soldiers, so the Williamsons lived with the Dulou family in a quaint cottage in the town of Générac.

Years later, in 2000, Edie, Debbie and other daughter Dianne made a return trip to France. They rented a car and drove from Paris south to Bordeaux. Although it had been 40 years, Madame Dulou remembered her American friends right away, invited them to stay the night and prepared their evening meal. Later, as they made their way to Paris, stopping at a variety of chateaux, the Americans were charmed by the pervasive scent of lavender that sweetened all the gift shops. At a castle, they bought an enchanting bouquet of wheat and lavender, whose potent perfume would be preserved along with all their pleasant memories in the making. Those memories, a love of gardening, a desire to work on a farm project with her mother and, “oddly enough,” muses Debbie, “a tip from my New York hairdresser,” who appreciated the valuable properties of lavender, all inspired her to start a business. Debbie and her husband Paul Johnson bought Seven Oaks farm in 2002.

At first, the lavender farm was a hay field planted in fescue, with only 100 lavender plants. But, having worked her father’s 200-acre farm in Pennsylvania Furnace, Pa., Edie knows how to make plants grow; she loves to be out in the lavender field, tending and pruning the plants while Debbie develops and perfects the products and handles marketing and advertising. The farm sells products ranging from cut flowers to culinary lavender in 2-ounce tins to all types of fragrance items—bath salts, sprays for rooms or linens, and sachets for drawers or the dryer. Edie, who studied home economics in college, and her daughter-in-law Rosanne quilt together and sew soft fabrics for the sachets and soothing eye pillows.

The 1860s farmhouse had been the home of Alyce Russell, a well-known community volunteer and plant lover, until she died at the age of 97. Six of the seven 150-year-old oaks for which the property is named remain, along with about 5,000 daffodils Russell planted. Says Debbie, “Alyce kept dividing her bulbs and extending the drifts running down to the stream. That’s pretty glorious in the spring.”

Lavender, with the calming effect of its scent, has long been reputed to have medicinal properties. It is used, for example, to treat migraine headaches and motion sickness. Since Roman times, there has been evidence of soldiers using lavender oil to keep wounds from getting infected, and it is used as a healing agent for bee stings and mosquito bites. Local herbalist and environmentalist Helen Ross Ford, of Wild Woman Herbal, has been featured at the farm’s summer festivals, showing how to make lavender oil and lip balm as well as how to use wildflowers to make healing products. In the past, class offerings have also included growing lavender, wreath making, cooking with lavender, and herbal crafts for children. The farm is a very kid-friendly place to visit. “Part of the idea,” says Debbie, “is to have a place where people can experience the great outdoors and our beautiful rural scenery and have a farm experience.”

Although the Williamson family had settled in Fauquier County after Glenn’s military service, Debbie admits she could hardly wait to move away to New York City after her high school graduation. “I swore, ‘I’ll never live in the country. It is so boring.’ It’s definitely one of those full-circle stories.” After 10 years, however, she left Flatbush in Brooklyn and moved back to Virginia in 2002, mainly so that her son, Lincoln, now 9 years old, could have a big back yard. “I

wanted him to have freedom, fresh air and cousins.”

He gets all of those in large doses. Debbie's brothers, Doug, Duane and David, all live within 20 minutes of the farm and have provided a fleet of cousins (the Williamsons have 14 grandchildren) with whom Lincoln plays. This corps gets pressed into service—lavender duty, that is—whenever their aunt/mother and grandmother see fit. The children love to play outside in the open spaces. Coincidentally, Edie's great-grandfather from Pennsylvania fought for the Union army in the Battle of Coffee Pot Hill at Auburn, only three miles from their property.

Soon after moving to the farm, Debbie collaborated with her parents on plans to build their house next door on a knoll, the former site of a dairy barn. The result is a new house that feels old. From its wide porches, visitors can linger with a glass of lemonade and enjoy a panoramic view of the Fauquier County countryside, a rural spot only about an hour from Washington, D.C. “Lovely

Fauquier County has benefited from the foresight of its dedicated citizens and its government, which have controlled growth and maintained its rural beauty,” says Debbie. “We are lucky to have a very high level of protection for our countryside guaranteed by easements, conservation programs and land-use tax rates for farmers.”

In 2006, Debbie and Edie began inviting the public to “pick your own” at harvesting time, which begins in June. Visitors are encouraged to bring their scissors and a camera as the lavender field is a great place for taking photos. “Everyone looks blissful among the blooms,” says Debbie.

Lavender prefers dry conditions, but even in Virginia humidity, the French varieties “Grosso” and “Provence” are two outstanding performers, and they tolerate temperatures down to 10 below zero. “Grosso,” also called “fat spike,” is used extensively in the perfume industry because of its high concentration of essential oil. It makes a great bush with a very clean scent.

Debbie considers the fragrance of lavender to be “unisex.” In fact, “men rate it as one of their favorite scents. It is much less sweet-smelling than other floral scents.” The farm also offers the English varieties “Munstead” and “Hidcote,” both shorter with dark, velvety blooms, as well as “Croxtton's Wild,” “Fred Boutin,” “Seal” and “Twickle.” Debbie likes “Croxtton's Wild” for baking because of its sweet flavor. Some culinary herbal delights include lavender-lemon pound cake, blueberry-lavender muffins and jams. Lavender syrup can be used to flavor drinks—teas, seltzers, club soda—and is great for topping ice cream. Rub lavender with other dried herbs to grill chicken “Provençal,” as the French do.

There is a real art to the final stage of production—drying. The quicker you dry lavender, the more the color and perfume will be retained, but you don't want it to be too hot and dry. Never put lavender in the attic as it will dry out the precious oils. “We have Mom's house almost completely full of drying lavender in

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season,” says Debbie, and the fragrance is heavenly. They let the temperature go up to 80 degrees and have the ceiling fans going upstairs as they dry the lavender in bunches spread on the wood floors, the beds, everywhere.

According to Debbie, “Dad is very tolerant of our lavender craziness.” So is her husband, Paul, a rock ‘n roll guitarist who played with the band Waxing Poetics in the 1980s and is currently a member of Master Plan, a group of friends from his New York days. Once, when Paul sheepishly admitted to his friend Andy Shernoff, a member of the punk rock band The Dictators, that he had to leave in order to finish some work in his wife's lavender field, the apology was hardly necessary. Shernoff responded enthusiastically, “What? I love lavender!”

## Growing Tips for Lavender:

- Put sand around the trunk to prevent “winterkill.”
- Use heavy-duty, tightly woven landscape cloth, so water and air get through but not weeds.
- Do not crowd the plants; plant a roomy 6 feet apart for good air circulation.
- Mound or raise when planting to allow for good drainage.
- Neutralize acid soil with lime.
- Prune every March by one-third to one-half, or a plant will get woody stems, which reduces bloom.
- Use organic fertilizer when green growth emerges.

## Lavender's advantages in the garden:

- Its mounding habit is very tidy—no sprawling.
- Drought resistant, rarely needing water—perfect for these last few years.
- Evergreen.
- Unattractive to pests such as insects and deer.

## Or Pick One of These ...

Lavender Fields Farm  
Glen Allen  
(804) 262-7167  
LavenderFieldsFarm.com

The Lavender Path  
Lovettsville  
(703) 999-5398  
TheLavenderPath.com

“Lavender pulls devotees from many areas,” says Debbie, “from grandmothers to punk rockers.” Given as a gift, lavender is a sign of luck and devotion, which may account for its increasing popularity at weddings and other special events. Debbie acknowledges, “It's been lucky for us.”  
The 2008 pick-your-own season includes all four weekends in June and July 5-6. Festival weekends are June 21-22 and June 28-29, but the farm is also open by appointment during the week and during the summer weeks after the scheduled season.  
SevenOaksLavenderFarm.com