

Searching for the sweet smell of success

By EMILY ANDERSON/The Grand Junction Daily Sentinel

Saturday, August 22, 2009

Behind Paola Legarre's East Orchard Mesa home, past the greenhouse and the organically grown cherry trees, grow 2,000 sweet-smelling lavender bushes organized in neat rows.

Legarre has 25 varieties of the plant with blueish-purple flowers.

"I want to see what does well in our area," she said.

The plants range from 1 to 3 years old and could have a life span of two decades before they stop blooming. Legarre sells dried lavender in bunches, as buds, or tucked into sachets, eye pillows and spa pillows. She also cooks the herb into desserts and other foods.

Members of the Lavender Association of Western Colorado will have a chance to check out Legarre's crop at a Sept. 12 meeting at her home. The association has about 30 members and became an official club in April.

Members share the trials and successes of growing the crop on the Western Slope and hope to throw a lavender festival in the Grand Valley in 2011.

Growers range from people growing a side lot of lavender on their property to farmers hoping to diversify their crop offerings, association President Kathy Kimbrough said. Kimbrough began growing lavender last year with help from the local office of the Colorado State University Cooperative Extension Service.

"Lavender likes hot, dry climates. I thought, 'That's us,' " she said.

Growing the herb was a relatively new concept in Western Colorado then, but she knew some farmers wanted to try growing lavender. So, she began hosting meetings last November and officially started the association in the spring.

She sent e-mails to master gardeners and the valley organic growers association and found interested growers in Olathe, Montrose, Delta, Paonia, Hotchkiss and across the Grand Valley.

"The word is just getting out everywhere," she said.

Lavender comes from the Mediterranean. The biggest producer is France, but it's grown across the United States as well. Lavender festivals in Ohio, Washington, Oregon, Pennsylvania, New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, California and Michigan bring in agritourism dollars as well as profit for growers.

Although growers in the association are just getting started, and no local farmer is distilling the plant to be used in bath items, Legarre sells bundles of lavender for \$5 at the Palisade Farmers Market. With at least 100 bundles at a time for sale, well, you do the math.

Legarre said she hopes association members can work together so they can start producing more lavender-based products such as essential oils, soaps, lotions and potpourri.

"It would be great to start producing lavender products locally," she said.

For more information about the Lavender Association of Western Colorado's next meeting, go to www.coloradolevender.org.

Find this article at:

http://www.gjsentinel.com/search/content/business/stories/2009/08/22/082309_1B_SUN_BIZ_Lavender.html