



LETTERS FROM THE WESTERN LOWLANDS: Fields of lavender, bushels of good fortune?

It takes a lot to get me out of bed at 6:30 on a Saturday morning. But this is an idea whose time has clearly come. It's 40 miles from Mack to Palisade, where our greenhouse tour starts early. Other people have to get up even earlier to get there from Montrose or Hotchkiss.

A scant four months ago, a couple of CSU Extension Master Gardeners stopped just looking at those rapturous postcard shots of French lavender fields and asked, "Why not right here in western Colorado?"

The original meeting, advertised by word of mouth and an ad in the paper, brought some 40-plus people together late last fall. Farmers, hoteliers, herbalists and essential oil brokers all showed up and asked the same burning question: Do you think we could actually make some money at this?

Yes, was the answer from Sequim, Wash., a farming area that turned sleepy hayfields into a tourist attraction complete with its own lavender festival. Small hotels sprang up like mushrooms. Lavender cultivation increased the income of farms while decreasing use of water and pesticides. Nobody got suddenly rich, but everybody did better.

And so, just a few meetings later, the budding lavender association for Western Colorado (name, logo and by-laws in the works) has attracted the blessing of Colorado State University extension in Grand Junction and the attention of Dr. Curtis Swift, our long-time and treasured agricultural agent. A commercial greenhouse in Palisade will be custom-growing lavender varieties suited to a range of climates that stretch from 4,500-5,500 feet. The higher altitude varieties will be tested at the CSU farm in Hotchkiss.

After the coffee hour tour of the lavender propagation operation, we will be moving on to Peach Street Distillery, also in Palisade. A couple of young guys converted an old warehouse right next to the train tracks to a street legal operation making local liquor from about anything they can get their hands on. Specialties are peach vodka, Olathe sweet corn vodka, and Jackelope gin made from juniper berries collected locally. They also make grappa (this is wine country) and Colorado straight bourbon. Distill lavender? Why not learn more, they said, and invited us all over. Plus, the bar is open. The generous Bloody Marys feature that sweet corn vodka.

Why not create a new industry growing lavender in Western Colorado? Lavender likes crappy soil and near-drought conditions. We have plenty of that. Plants make essential oils in response to environmental stress. We have plenty of that.

Aromatic plants like lavender are natural insect and deer repellent. Protection from predators is one reason plants make essential oils. We have plenty of predators too, especially those scary West Nile mosquitoes, and

lavender planted around the patio is a good way to discourage them.

But can we make any money at this?

Yes, says the experience of the Aromatic Plant Project (www.aromaticplantproject.com) in California. The project was founded by herbalist/aromatherapist Jeanne Rose some 10 years ago. It has continued to use education and marketing techniques to create an enthusiastic market for locally grown aromatic products. Farmers grow lavender, lemon verbena and other aromatic plants with dependable market demand. Agritourism in the area has increased, and interplanting of aromatics with other crops has greatly reduced the need for chemical pesticides. Nobody got suddenly rich, but everybody did better.

Why not grow lavender right here in western Colorado? We already produce excellent fruit and wine. Good orchard and vineyard land is historically good land for essential-oil producing herbs, the aromatics and the kitchen herbs. Lavender essential oil in particular has a rock steady market demand. Lavender essential oil is about as close to a cure-all as anything gets. Quality high altitude lavender fetches top dollar. The guys at the Peach Street Distillery are already talking about a lavender liqueur.

As for Tom and me, we are beyond delighted. Our little aromatherapy business, Alma del Sol Aromatherapy, has been providing essential oil education and quality essential oils to western Colorado since 1996. We were excited when we started to source American essential oils. The availability of truly local aromatics would be a dream come true. We don't have a farm, but we are supporting our lavender association with our expertise, market knowledge and connections, and with our library. It's a long-term investment, but we feel it is worth it. CSU is helping us identify possible grants.

It takes a lot to get me out of bed at 6:30 a.m. on a Saturday. Not a problem. I feel like a kid on Christmas morning.

Check out Barbara's Web site at www.oasisbotanica.com. There are a lot of specific articles about using aromatic plants and natural solutions. The site features all Alma del Sol products and provides a web store for other local herbcraft. Inquiries welcome.

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