

Fragrant Flora by Steven Knudsen

You will find lavender missing from the list of the top 10 agriculture commodities in the 2007 San Luis Obispo County Crop Report. This agriculture crop, however, has gained popularity as boutique growers countywide find lavender can be a viable option for small and large producers alike.

Native to the Mediterranean region south to Africa, lavender, a member of the mint family, is common in the landscaping industry for its combination of beauty, scent



and drought resistance. More than just a beautiful plant, lavender can be grown commercially to produce a number of agriculture products.

Cut fresh and dried, a bouquet of lavender continues to be beautiful and fragrant for many months. The essential oil that gives the blossom its fragrance is commonly extracted and distilled to produce nearly pure lavender oil.

Lavender oil is one of the most commonly used base fragrances in many of the world's perfumes. It can also be used as an all-natural herbal remedy for many ailments because the oil is thought to have antiseptic and anti-inflammatory properties.

According to Janice Silva and Bob Bostwick, owners of Green Acres Lavender Farm in Atascadero, it takes three hours to process three pounds of lavender blossoms. From that distillation process, they are able to extract three ounces of oil.

Silva and Bostwick planted lavender after purchasing the farm in 1998. According to Silva, lavender wasn't the first crop grown there. The farm had been in active agriculture production with a roadside stand for nearly a decade prior to them moving to the Central Coast. "It had been a turkey farm and a family farm for many years," she says. "There have been many gardens and old fruit trees grown here; and every kind of animal has been raised here, along with many happy families."



After their first harvest in 2005, Green Acres became the first and largest "open to the public" lavender grower and distiller in the county. "Customers come from miles around to walk through the rows of lavender plants and to enjoy the aroma and picturesque landscaping of the well-groomed rows," says Silva.

Today, Green Acres has more than 13,000 plants on their 4.25-acre farm. In addition, they contract with other growers around the county to grow another 30,000 plants. This keeps the fires lit under the seven-gallon copper still as Bostwick works long hours to process the lavender buds into the essential oil.

Silva and Bostwick grow two main varieties of lavender—Grosso and Provence. They selected these two types because both are tolerant to the Central Coast region and have tremendous oil producing characteristics.

Unlike many agriculture commodities, overly rich soil will actually cause the lavender plants to be less fragrant, according to Silva. "When the plant is stressed, it produces an abundance of oil. It is the natural way that the plant protects itself from wounds, fungus and bacterial invasion."



Along with fragrance and herbal remedy products, many other items can be made from the food-safe culinary variety, Provence lavender. Freshly made lavender lemonade

is available at the farm for those who come to learn more about the plants. A gift shop with “everything lavender” has been added to the Silva-Bostwick home, which is decorated with mosaics of lavender in the rural lifestyle.

Lavender blooms during July and August when the brilliant blossoms turn the hillside dark lavender. For the Green Acres Lavender Farm Annual Lavender Festival, July 11–13, “The lavender blossoms will be at their peak,” says Silva. Festival music is by Corinne West. More information about the festival can be found at www.greenacreslavenderfarm.com.



Uses for Lavender

Suggested by Green Acres Lavender Farm

- Add to a hot tub or soothing bath
- Use as antiseptic and anti-fungal
- Place two drops on pillow for restful sleep
- Use lavender bouquets to keep flies and insects away
- Flavor vinegars, jellies, syrups, sugars and salads
- Steep fresh or dried flowers to make tea, which can aid digestion and calm nerves
- Add dried flowers to batter for cookies, cakes and other cooked confections
- Use fresh flowers to decorate desserts and sprinkle on top of fresh fruit
- Repel insects
- Apply on dry or chapped lips and skin
- Freshen linens in storage or laundry



Photos

Far left – One-gallon lavender plants (above) do well in Central Coast soil and are favorites with local landscapers. A seven-gallon copper still (below) at Green Acres Lavender Farm processes lavender buds into essential oil.

Top center – Lavender attracts beneficial insects.

Left – A variety of lavender products is produced on the Central Coast.

Above – The first lavender of the season blooms in late June.

Photos by Steven Knudsen.