

IN THE GARDEN

"With immediacy and intensity, smell activates memory, allowing our minds to travel freely in time." — Tom Robbins, *Jitterbug Perfume*, 1984

Five women are laughing and teasing as they position themselves around and on a weathered stepladder. The photographers juggle their assorted cameras, offering posing tips and laughing along with them. Each woman is wearing a different hat—a floppy straw, a faded denim, an out-of-season felt, a battered print, a no-nonsense baseball cap. Each holds a bundle of bright purple lavender, freshly picked, from the fields of the Jardin du Soleil farm.

These visitors from Seattle seem to be having a grand, uproarious time-like a Red Hat Society in purple—at the annual Sequim Lavender Festival.

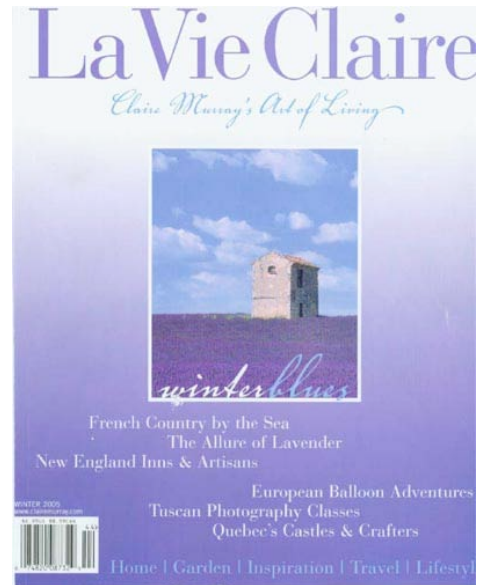
Like thousands of others here today, they rose early, trekking by ferry and car to this little town overlooking the Straits of Juan de Fuca on the Olympic Peninsula. Now known as the lavender capital of the United States, Sequim and its annual festival draw visitors come from across the country; many return with friends and relatives. They gather up fragrant bundles in the u-pick fields, attend seminars on all things lavender, from growing to cooking, and crowd into farm sheds converted into shops to buy products for scenting their bureau drawers or themselves. When their feet give out, they find a shady spot under a tree and drink lemonade or margaritas spiked with lavender. When hunger strikes, they sample sausage or pasta or ice cream, all flavored with the ubiquitous herb.

Lavender. What is it about this fragrant flower that motivates people to drive for miles just to walk through fields and become engulfed in its heady scent? Though few of us know its history or have any idea of its many uses, we know we love it. Soaps, lotions, or bath oils infused with lavender send us into quiet retreat. A lavender-filled sachet induces relaxation. A cup of lavender tea sets the day's clock to calm.

Barb Hanna, who co-owns Sequim's Lost Mountain Lavender farm with her husband, says, "Lavender affects so many senses—sight, smell, taste. People come into our shop, walk right over to the big oak barrel full of lavender, run their hand through it, and tell me it brings back so many childhood memories... grandma's linens... maybe their mother's cologne."

In Victorian England, peddlers sold lavender to ladies, most likely laundry women, who tucked a sprig or a sachet of lavender between freshly washed sheets or hung a bouquet to season the kitchen. Centuries before London vendors sold sweet lavender to housewives and laundry girls, early civilizations put the herb to good use. Egyptians reputedly used it in mummification. The Phoenicians, Romans, and Greeks per fumed themselves with its oil. The word lavender is, in fact, rooted in the Latin verb "to wash."

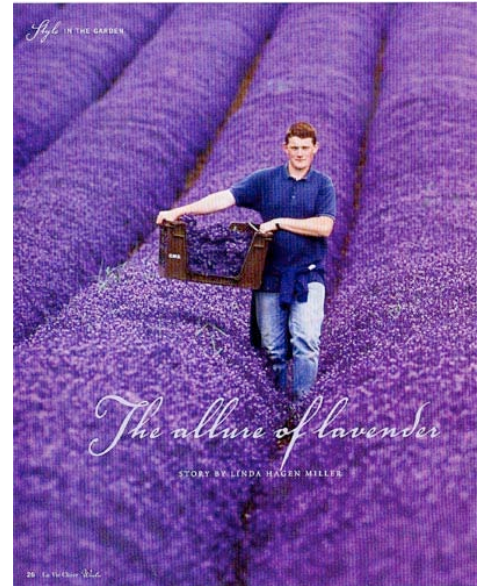
Beyond its aroma-therapeutic qualities, lavender has also been used as an insect repellent, a smoking additive, a "mind tonic" to alleviate depression, a poultice for toothaches and sore joints,



a wound disinfectant, a headache remedy, even as an ingredient in witches' brews.

During the Middle Ages, though lavender was known as the “herb of love,” it had a disarmingly dual role. On one hand, it was considered an aphrodisiac, while on the other, a sprinkle of lavender water on the head supposedly kept a person chaste, a mixed message that suggests its chameleon-like qualities. Modern testing reveals the former to be true lavender is indeed a sexy plant. A Chicago research foundation reported that the most arousing of all fragrances tested on its male subjects was a combination of the scents of lavender and pumpkin.

The scent—the evocative, seductive aroma of lavender—varies from species to species as does its color. There are at least twenty-eight species and numerous varieties of the bushy, blossom topped shrub. Its color runs the spectrum of blues, from pastel violet to mauve to rich purple. In some plants, the blooms cluster on the reedy stems like a clutch of chatty ladies; in others, they scatter with the independence of teenagers.



English lavender, sometimes sold as true lavender, was the basis of Great Britain's lavender oil industry in the late 1700s and is particularly prized for its pungent scent. As much as the English would like to claim this herb as their own, there's a bit of mystery in its past. Some historians think it originally grew in the stony altitudes between 2,000 and 6,000 feet in the southern French Alps. Others claim it made its way to Great Britain with the Romans.

The French lavender that blankets the countryside of Provence is a somewhat less spirited species. Actually a cross between English lavender and spike lavender (a native of southern France), it has a quieter scent; some say it resembles balsam or rosemary.

In the United States, wherever the climate is right (sunny and dry) and the spirit is strong, farmers and urban escape artists are turning fields into lavender, and lavender into a thriving industry. It starts with the farms, but in the true spirit of American entrepreneurship, agriculture morphs into agri tourism, which morphs into culinary tourism. Festivals evolve, stores open, craft and culinary classes spring up, chefs create entire recipe books devoted to cooking with lavender. Perhaps nowhere is this lavender sweep more apparent than in Sequim, Washington.

The Sequim (pronounced & “squam”) Prairie lies in an enviable latitude under the rain shadow of the Olympic Mountains. While the rest of the Olympic Peninsula is doused with as much as 120 inches of rain a year, Sequim gets a mere 20 inches and a whole lot more sunshine. By the mid 1990s, the anomaly of this dry, almost balmy climate in the land of gray and rain was attracting retirees in droves. Suddenly, the area's farmland had more value if it was paved over, and Sequim's traditional agricultural base was disappearing under housing and commercial development.

The community galvanized behind the idea of lavender farms, believing they could preserve land, create jobs, attract visitors, spawn related cottage industries, and generally enhance life in the broad Dungeness Valley. Lofty goals, for sure, but all have come true and more. Sequim's first festival a decade ago attracted a few dozen folks, mostly family and friends, but this year's event,

held in July, drew over 30,000 people from as far away as New England.

Sequim is not alone in falling under lavender's spell. Across the country, small farms, country inns, entire communities are inviting visitors to their u-pick gardens and building elaborate celebrations around the queen plant of aromatherapy.

Lavender. Increasingly it finds its way into our gardens, our flowerpots, and onto our windowsills. If we're lucky enough to walk through a field of lavender and embrace the hardy blooms, our memory is forever imprinted with the wondrously potent power of its scent.