

TRANSPLANTED BEAUCOUP DE BLOOMS

*Fragrant fields take root at
the end of the North Fork.*

BY PAT MARLOWE

EAST MARION—On a sunny afternoon there are few places more otherworldly to visit than a lavender farm, especially one owned by a Frenchman. Expect quiet, as this farm is tended by hand. Expect order and beauty, but given that we're talking flowers that's kind of a given. And then expect the *cultivateur* to offer you a glass of wine, seeing as how he was just finishing lunch anyway.

Lavender by the Bay in East Marion is the creation of Serge Rozenbaum and his wife, Susan. A mechanical contractor by trade, Rozenbaum's lavender life started 20 years ago when he and Susan bought a home on a dune in Southold. Their yard's sandy soil made landscaping nearly impossible. So the Parisian native recalled the merchant that used to visit the neighborhood where he grew up. The man rode a donkey with lavender-packed bushels on each side of the animal. His mother would send him out to buy bouquets, which she then used to freshen the linen and in the kitchen.

Soon their Southold backyard was filled with blooms. "So we put some in front of the house with a for sale sign," he says. "And when we came back there was money in the can."

A light went on. In 2001, the couple bought the 10 acres in East Marion. The land, destined for agriculture in perpetuity because the development rights have been sold, was nearly perfect for their plan, as lavender is hard to grow.





The soil cannot be compacted or dense with clay, says Rozenbaum, a neutral pH of seven is critical—if the soil is too acidic the plants will die—and good drainage is essential. One year, he says, too much rain raised the water table, and many plants died. Now Rozenbaum drills three feet and fills the holes with sand before the plant goes in. Computer-controlled drip irrigation keeps the plants watered during the hotter months. Black tarp covers the ground around the plants to keep weeds at bay, as Rozenbaum farms organically and nothing gets sprayed.

He figures that by the time a new plant, which he cultivates from cuttings in a greenhouse on the property, begins to bloom, it's cost him \$200. Such care pays off in the endless rows of delicate stems holding up fuzzy, fragrant flowers that sometimes reach waist-high.

This year Rozenbaum is putting in 15,000 more plants, a mixture of the 20 varieties already in the ground. These include French and English hybrids; he says Spanish lavender doesn't grow here. The Maillette is good for essential oil, he says, and has the valuable trait of blooming twice per season, so does the Hidcote giant. This means twice as many flowers for bouquets and sachets, which sell out each year. But also for the lavender honey produced in the purple-hued hives that ring the field. Rozenbaum says there's a waiting list for that.

"Which puts pressure on me," he says. "People say it's the best honey they've ever had. So now I have to make it good every year." During the blooming season, which starts mid-June and peaks around Independence Day, Rozenbaum says the farm is so infiltrated by working bees that it sounds like a helicopter landing pad.

While he sells much of his produce at the farm stand in East Marion, the new plants are meant to help keep up with the demand at the Greenmarkets in New York City.

"That's what I want," he says. "A donkey with lavender bushels on either side. Wouldn't you like to see that in Union Square?" 🍯

Tickled purple: Serge Rozenbaum (right) and his wife, Susan, first planted the herb of his youth on a dune in Southold 20 years ago. Today, their blooms in East Marion supply sachets, bouquets, essential oil and memorable honey.

