

Purple Passion

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May 1,
2016

A lavender farm in Dearing is heaven-“scent” bliss for the owners and visitors alike.

Most people love to entertain friends and family at their home. However, Lisa Kessler of Dearing, near Thomson, takes her Southern hospitality a step further. She opens up her home, White Hills Farm, to the community.

As a lifelong educator, though, she doesn't just entertain her guests at the 30-acre lavender farm. The former middle school science teacher and college educator shares her knowledge with them as well.

A Happy Accident

Lisa offers tours and demonstrations at the organic farm that she and her husband, Ben, bought in 2008 as a recreational property. They had searched and searched for a place to plant hazelnut trees, and the Dearing property, which is located along the fall line, proved to be the ideal location to plant their orchards of 60 hazelnut and 30 pecan trees. And then they had another idea.

“Lavender was just kind of an accident. We threw some out with the trees, and it grew well,” says Lisa. “People started wanting what we had, and I like it, too.”

Lisa grows about 10 different kinds of lavender on the farm, where 1.5 acres are under true cultivation. She often buys starter plants from organic sites. Then she grows them to a viable stage and puts them in ground. She initially grew Spanish lavender, which grows well in the South. She then added English lavender to her garden.

“Everybody will say that French lavender is the one they use in products, but they don't use French lavender at all,” says Lisa. “They use English.”

English lavender, which actually comes from Bulgaria, is used for culinary purposes, she says, and Moroccan lavender is good for aromatherapy. The deep purple Phenomenal lavender holds up well in the humidity of the South.

In 2010 Lisa went to the Oregon Lavender Festival for a 10-farm tour to learn more about growing the herb. “I started planting differently after that, and I started to propagate a lot of my own,” she says.



Photography by Addie Strozier



White Hills Farm is one of the few lavender-growing farms in the South, says Lisa, and the lavender is hand-grown and harvested on site. The lavender begins to bloom in late April or early May, and it reaches the height of its season in late June.

“Lavender likes to be high and dry. It doesn’t like to be watered a lot,” Lisa says. “Don’t water it unless it’s extremely dry. When you water it, water it around the base and let it absorb from the edge.”

She grows her lavender in a mix of poultry manure, crushed oyster shell and white sand. She has two cutting gardens for lavender, which she uses for products, and she also has planted lavender along a sidewalk on the property.

“They would normally be in a calcium-rich soil,” Lisa says. “In the Mediterranean it grows on rocky hills in its natural habitat.”

However, she shares another recommendation for growing lavender – and other plants – as well.

“One of the tricks to organic is to plant close to yourself,” says Lisa. “You’re more likely to use it.”

Taking her own advice, she grows her lavender near the 1890 farmhouse where the Kesslers live. Of course, the house became a project, too, as they followed a Katrina Cottage plan to add the porch area to the front of the house in 2011. (Katrina Cottages were developed in response to the need for alternatives to the Federal Emergency Management Agency trailers where people in New Orleans and other Gulf Coast cities temporarily lived after Hurricane Katrina.)

Lost Art

That extra space has come in handy. During lavender season from April through July, Lisa holds tours and workshops almost every Friday (Details about the events are available at whitehillsherbs.com). They recently built a new barn to hold classes, private parties and special events throughout the year as well.

“People want to experience what they’re doing, and I want people to enjoy the time they spend out here,” says Lisa. “I want them to learn something they can take away and do themselves.”

About 30 people of all ages visited White Hills Farm for a farm tour and demonstration on making a lavender lip balm and a moisturizing balm.

“Lavender is anti-viral, anti-bacterial and anti-fungal,” Lisa says.

With its medicinal aspects, she says, lavender can be used in soaps and cosmetics as well as for cooking. “You can get a whole lot of health benefits from lavender,” says Lisa.

She also says anyone who wants to make healing balms can choose different materials, depending on their essence or medicinal properties, for their products. For instance, she says, thyme is a good medicinal herb.

“Just because something is natural or plant-based doesn’t mean it is good for you,” says Lisa, who also worked as a dermatology physician’s assistant in Savannah.

However, Lisa uses primarily organic products in the goods she sells, which include soaps, oils, cooking products and decorative lavender pieces. Her products are available through Augusta Locally Grown and at Red Clay Market



in Liberty Square in Evans. And of course, her goods are available at White Hills Farm, where a large beverage dispenser filled with hibiscus tea is likely to be waiting for guests on the front porch.

“All-natural products are really tough to find,” says Lisa. “It’s something affordable that you can do.”

Tricia Hughes of Augusta visited the lavender farm for the first time after she saw information about the tours online.

“It’s something a little different. It’s just good to get out of the city and see farmland,” she says. “I just wanted to see lavender grow. I did not know lavender could grow here.”

Robin Johnson, who has a store with repurposed pieces, visited the farm from her home in Warren County. “I’m interested in agro-tourism,” she says. “I came to get ideas and be inspired.”

Linda Smith of Uchee, Alabama, whose daughter is an educator at Hickory Hill in Thomson, has been to White Hills Farm twice.

She has enjoyed seeing the farm grow, and she appreciates its link to the past.

“It’s a wonderful way to keep connected. We’ve lost that art,” says Linda. “This is coming back to what we’ve lost.”

By Sarah James

