



Suburban farm lush with lavender

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In the country where the lavender grows so blue, the gardener works and keeps anew.

She picks and picks joyfully, while the bumblebee keeps her company.

Love, devotion and prosperity are her goals, deep in her heart where the lavender grows.

—Rhonda D. Whetham, 1996



■ Family operation uses basement workshop to make soaps and lotions.

By Andrea Myers

STREETSBORO, Ohio — Locals may never guess the treasure that Jody Byrne and Michael Slyker transplanted into their community.

The couple's 14-acre Streetsboro plot, part of a former dairy farm, is in a residential area. The only thing farmed nearby are housing developments and

road construction.

One house, two cars in the driveway, a shed in back, a kennel with two dogs.

Nothing looks out of the ordinary.

But peer at rows of herbs on an east-facing hillside or step through the front doors and you'll believe in the extraordinary.

In a growing suburban area, the couple is making a go of alternative farming.

And their special crop, lavender, and the products they make from it, is turning heads.

A cloud of scents. The scent of lavender, an ancient herb known for both its calming and stimulating properties, oozes from every nook and cranny and pore in Byrne's home.

An open door lets more scents waft skyward from the basement workshop where Byrne's daughter and granddaughter, Amanda and Chrissy Wiecek, sift lavender with metal screen sieves and mix essential oils, salts, leaves and buds.

Slyker slides chunks of soaps from their paper-lined forms and delicately slices each oversized loaf, celebrating small victories like a successful recipe variation.

Their operation. DayBreak Lavender Farm is a mixture of farming, marketing and artistry.

A transplant. Like lavender itself, Byrne isn't native to this area.

On her apartment's terrace on Roosevelt Island in Manhattan, the woman tended eight lavender plants in window boxes until 1986.

"I always liked lavender. Even if I could only have a few plants, I wanted them. The plant is useful – I could cut stalks or even cook with it," she said.

But then a job transfer to the Cleveland area – she works as a trends forecaster in the professional spa, salon and cosmetic industries – forced her to rethink her small-time gardening hobby.

She put in 30 plants at her first Ohio home in Berea – that's where she found, despite expert naysayers' opinions, lavender could grow in the state's climate.

Wanting more. Then she decided she wanted acreage, to live in a rural area. The Streetsboro farm suited her. At the new home, she planted lavender everywhere she could. *(continued)*



DayBreak Lavender Farm has 1,000 reasons to make soaps and lotions. Plants will show flower buds later this spring and harvest takes place in July.

Get the Details

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Today, there are more than 1,000 plants – and more to be planted – in two organically farmed plots.

Plant cuttings here keep the farm supplied, as Byrne and Slyker concoct potions of soap, creams, lotions and other natural toiletries.

Best in quality. Byrne is proud of her crop. She's making profit from her suburban farm, and making customers happy with soothing and healing products.

So the business is more than customer-driven: It's Byrne-driven

She makes what she wants and how she wants it – and that means using the highest quality ingredients imported from around the globe

She imports Moroccan clay, shea butter from Ghana, tropical coconut oil, mango butter and babassu oil, among other exotic inputs, because they are superior to most others used in the industry.

“Labeling is where nobody can lie. Our



Michael Slyker slides chunks of soap from paper-lined forms and hand-slices each oversized loaf. Each bar cures for weeks before it's wrapped and presented to the consumer.

shea butter is 70 percent. Other bigger companies use 3-5 percent,” she said.

Using the best is Byrne's signature.

“I would rather explain my price than defend my quality,” she said.

Swiss Army herb. Lavender, dubbed the Swiss Army knife of herbs, is the most versatile herb, she says.

“It's not like basil, where you can cook

with it and that's about all. You can really do a lot of stuff with this,” she said.

Through trial and error, she's found many uses: It is great for teas, cookies, sugars, honey, soap, lotions and creams, crafts and cooking.

Sudsing up. In the mid 1990s, she tried her hand at those uses, but it wasn't until about 18 months ago that bar soap came along.

Donning goggles and long-sleeve shirts, Byrne and Slyker measured and mixed their first batch. They took turns stirring the mixture for more than 45 minutes before the olive oil soap set.

“I'm a pretty good cook, and making soap was just another recipe.”

“Then we jumped up and down like 7-year-olds on Christmas because we'd done it,” she said.

“To us, soap is magic.”

Soap master. Now Slyker is the operation's soap master artisan and makes 80 unordinary types of soaps – 750 pounds, or 1,500-1,850 bars monthly – sold only at farmers' markets, health foods stores, Internet and by word of mouth.

It's easy to see why the average person could make room in their budget for DayBreak's soaps: names like 'pink grapefruit with lemon grass spa bar' and 'dreamsicle' and 'patchouli rose' could lure shoppers even before they see or smell the over-sized bars Byrne peddles.



Three generations work together in Jody Byrne's soapmaking lab. Pictured are Byrne, right; her daughter, Amanda Wiecek, center; and granddaughter, Chrissy Wiecek. The women mixed oils, salts and other natural ingredients to make a salt scrub.



Shelves hold bars of curing decorative soaps manufactured in Jody Byrne and Michael Slyker's basement factory. Each bar has colorful swirls or sizable pieces of buds, leaves and other ingredients to prove the good stuff is in there, Byrne said.

"To me, everything has to be big. I don't want a little bitty bar of soap," she said.

"And I don't think soap should be square," she said of her odd-shaped treasures, including hand-formed, softball-sized bars.

Marketing. As sales grow, Byrne is convinced the farm's signature country-French style wrapping paper, and logo are all the marketing it needs.

"I'm lucky to be blessed with a marketing background, but I have worked hard to develop my brand," she said.

"Farmers by and large aren't good marketers. Once a crop becomes a commodity, all discussion is about price, not quality," she said of lessons first learned in the cosmetic industry.

"Once it's about the deal, you're sunk. But I want to use my crop and add value to my lavender," she said.

Spreading out. Byrne says more landowners in the area should consider lavender farming.

Significant acreage isn't required, and using the herb is as easy as following a recipe.

"It doesn't have to become your life, but

it is yours to use and do something with," she said of the choice to grow lavender.

"For me, this is a good city-girl farm."



(Reporter Andrea Myers welcomes reader feedback by phone at 1-800-837-3419, ext. 22, or by e-mail at amyers@farmanddairy.com.)



The lowdown on lavender

- Lavender requires a sweet soil. A soil test can diagnose and get soil ready to plant the herb.
- Lavender requires a well-drained bed with moving air and sunshine.
- There are more than 200 varieties of lavender that range in color from gray to bright purple. Not all grow equally well in Ohio.
- The crop is a perennial. In Ohio, it's harvested in July.
- Byrne and Slyker hand-plant and harvest their lavender, so no tractors or other equipment are required.