



(All photos courtesy of Mary Averill of Averill & Associates Creative Lab and DayBreak Lavender Farm.)

Flower Children

A Streetsboro couple grows a thriving business out of a love of lavender.

BY SARAH VRANDENBURG



The lavender fields of Jody Byrne and Michael Slyker (top) yield organic products such as handmade lavender mint soap (above).

It is entirely appropriate that your nose is the first thing to enter this pleasant suburban home in northern Portage County. Following it leads to an atmosphere of pure fragrance. It's not perfume; it's not food. It certainly isn't a plug-in air-freshener.

Welcome to DayBreak Lavender Farm, the love child of Jody Byrne and husband, Michael Slyker. The aromas — it would be an insult to call this an odor — rise from the basement heart of this cottage industry, where the couple and their employees design, make, cure and ship more than 120 different kinds of soap. Since the farm's conception in 2001, the couple has crafted a growing product line that now numbers 190 items, ranging from soap for pets to food items, lotions, even “bodycandles.” This imaginative item is a twofer: as a candle, it fills a room with a delicious fragrance. When extinguished, the candle leaves a puddle of warm, fragrant liquid, delightful to massage onto body, hands and feet.

All this from lavender? Indeed, although lavender (genus *lavandula*) is perhaps the oldest known medicinal

and aromatic herb, tracing its uses to the early Arabs, Greeks and Romans, it is Ohio's newest cash crop. Byrne and Slyker have staked their future on this showy, fragrant plant, establishing Ohio's first lavender farm — and even have an Ohio Senate proclamation to prove it. But this enterprising pair doesn't want exclusive territory. They believe in the value of lavender so much as a boon to health, beauty and the economy that Byrne is willing to help others get started. Her sights are set no lower than to make Ohio the lavender capital of the Midwest.

Planting the seed

This isn't a lifelong dream finally realized, although lavender has always been a part of Byrne's life. DayBreak Farm is the expression of one couple's

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love of beauty and commitment to environmental stewardship, not to mention sound business sense.

The process by which she came to grow and share lavender is as organic as the plants she cultivates. While living on Roosevelt Island in New York City, Byrne's lavender crop was limited to what she could grow in containers on her balcony, which were whipped and chilled by the winds off the East River when they weren't baking in the airless New York summers. Through it all, the plants thrived. As editor in chief of *American Salon* magazine in 1986, she was transferred to Ohio as part of a corporate merger. She immediately fell in love with the state that reminded her of her childhood in Westport, Connecticut.

She also knew she wanted some property, and in 1993 bought her 14-acre piece of paradise in Streetsboro. Why call it DayBreak? "Just wake up in my bedroom any morning and the sun is shining," Byrne quips, blue eyes sparkling beneath a crown of close-cropped black hair speckled with gray. Besides her sense of humor, the most striking of her features is her wide, warm smile.

"Lavender is a culture," says Byrne, ticking off its varied uses: healing, culinary, housekeeping, cosmetic and craft. "You can't have that discussion about oregano." It comes from the family that includes thyme, rosemary, basil and sage, giving it its credibility in the kitchen. But aroma has always been its calling card.

So Byrne had the lavender and the land. Next was the learning curve. The urban sophisticate's neighbors spotted her cutting the grass with a push-mower and dubbed her "the fool on the hill." One day, one of her nearest neighbors showed up on her doorstep.

"You're going to be needing help," said neighbor Mike Cipra, as he proffered his housewarming gift. "I have a brush hog."

Byrne says she thought the field



Two fiends of DayBreak volunteer to help plant lavender in the fields with co-founder Michael Slyker (right).

mower he was referring to was some sort of animal.

Setting down roots in Streetsboro and cultivating a small lavender patch out back, she continued to work for *American Salon* until a downsizing enabled her to shift gears and open her own consulting business, Trends and Sources International. She provides trend forecasting services for the salon, beauty, wellness and spa industries.

Enter Michael Slyker, who had spent his working career with the Norfolk & Southern Railroad until he took a buyout. A master craftsman, Slyker builds replica firearms from the period of the French and Indian War. He also restores wooden canoes, several of which are in his workshop just outside the basement where he makes soap all day. They met when Jody answered an online ad: "Aging hippie seeks wood nymph."

After she married Slyker in 2000, Byrne wanted to turn her passion for lavender into something more. His background (his grandfather had a farm in Huron County) and commitment to sustainable development blended well with Byrne's knowledge of the beauty industry. They planted

their first quarter-acre test garden in 2001. "Once we were growing it, we had to figure out what to do with it," says Byrne.

Their first product, still available, was Lavender Mint Salt Glow Scrub, which they marketed at North Union Farmers Market at Shaker Square in Cleveland. Having never made soap, they started by using an assortment of recipes that are readily available. From the beginning, they remained focused on creating products that nourish the skin, contain ingredients that are marketed through fair trade organizations and are organically grown and produced. They take the moniker "aromatherapy" very seriously.

A growing product

Their line of luscious-sounding soaps includes such names as Lavender Lilac, Chocolate Orange and Almond Crème. There are complexion bars and soaps with clay that act as masques. There are lotions and splashes and a full line of products for men. All are handcrafted — Michael is the principal soap and lotion artisan — and consist entirely of natural oils such as rice bran,

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grape seed, canola, virgin olive, and essential oils extracted from herbs, minerals and organic shea butter. A line of culinary products gives customers the chance to try out teas and organic herbs for cooking.

Anyone who is serious about growing lavender should visit DayBreak's web site, www.daybreaklavenderfarm.com, where there is not only a complete product catalog, but also a link to The Lavender Project, which tells the story of how the couple first started growing lavender. It shares many of the discoveries they have made along the way, discusses the best types of lavender to grow for this climate and offers tips on everything from pruning to soil ingredients. They even have cost estimates and the dollar yield per acre, so that those who want to make a business of it have some basic financial information.

Byrne and Slyker consider farmers to be among the last true heroes, and profits from the sale of their Earth Angels soap line are donated to FarmAid. Agriculture remains among the top industries in Ohio, making lavender farming a natural fit. Ohio's climate is ideal for most lavenders, although the northern climate is tough on the less hardy; more varieties would thrive farther south. The herb is easy to grow and such a good cash crop that it offers today's beleaguered farmers an alternative to ramping up for factory farming or selling their land for development.

In addition to donating to Farm Aid, the couple offers a product discount to hospice programs. The wisdom of their generosity was confirmed by one hospice nurse who told them how effective their lavender vodka spray was in helping a terminally ill patient relax and sleep.

If there is a drawback to living your dream it is that it can outgrow your expectations. Byrne and Slyker are looking for land relatively near their current property to move the farm's operations. They live in a residential

area of Streetsboro and, while they love their farm and intend to remain on it, they cannot invite the crowds that such a growing operation attracts. Already they have had to turn down requests from the American Motorcoach Association to make their farm a regular tour stop.

"Our neighbors didn't ask for this," Byrne explains. But new land also opens up new opportunities, including a larger production area, tea shop, expanded store and classes (Byrne is a world-class cook). There is nothing but possibility ahead. •

DayBreak Lavender Farm

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Growing Tips

DayBreak Lavender Farm grows 13 varieties of lavender. All thrive in blazing sun and, once established, are very drought resistant. Lavender loves well-drained, sweet soil, so DayBreak's beds are mulched with a mixture of coarse sand and finely crushed limestone to which they sometimes add ground oyster shells. You can get oyster shells wherever you buy chicken feed because it's used as grit. Lavender plants must also be pruned regularly, after they are done blooming. Each plant should last at least 10 years, possibly longer if given TLC.

First Annual Lavender Festival

July 7-9, Fri.-Sat. 9 a.m.-8 p.m.,
Sun. 9 a.m.-6 p.m. Admission
\$5 or \$15 for two adults and
two children up to age 13;
each additional child \$5.

The festival features a food tent, lavender cook-off, hands-on workshops and opportunities to pick your own lavender and create bouquets.