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Spring/Summer 2012

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Complimentary

Lavender fields forever



Langford farm is rooted in history

By Raina Delisle

Looking out over her lush lavender field, many fond memories come to mind for professional gardener Lynda Dowling. Her pale blue eyes survey her quaint property as she stands under a heritage apple tree in a long flowing skirt and gardening shoes. She smiles softly.

“When I was small, I was feeding the horses out here. I used to feed them jam on toast.” Dowling laughs at her earliest memory of life on the farm that’s been in her family since 1910. Dowling points to a collection of crystals dangling from the branches of the apple tree her grandfather planted and says they were hung to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the farm.

Lynda Dowling has been growing lavender on her quirky family farm for more than 20 years. Photo: TJ Watt

Dowling spent her first 18 months on the farm before moving to Brentwood Bay. She often visited the farm as a child and recalls picking wildflowers with her grandmother, who promised to leave her, her brother and her sister a piece of the land so they too could raise families there. While the other grandchildren sold their parcels, Happy Valley Lavender and Herb Farm sits on what was the goat pasture.

“It’s really nice for me to be able to bring up a family in a place that has history,” says Dowling, who has two children in their 20s, daughter Frances and son Rowan. “I have a lot of gratitude to my grandmother.”

Dowling visited her grandparents often and then returned to start a

Frances Dowling (below) helps harvest lavender, an activity the whole community is welcomed to do. Photo: Black Press





family and farm of her own with her husband, Michael, in the 1980s. “We got into herbs first and then lavender came along,” Dowling says. “It chose us.”

The memory of how the fragrant flower found its way into the family’s life has Dowling flush with excitement. It was January 1987, when a woman in her 80s, nicknamed Duffy, showed up at her door with a Munstead lavender bush in a box. Dowling had gone to Duffy’s property in years prior to harvest her lavender to make crafts. To thank Duffy, Dowling would bring soap, potpourri, tea and a cooking blend — the same things she makes today and sells in her gift shop and at craft fairs. When Duffy was moving,

Lynda Dowling’s grandmother’s bed is an iconic part of the landscape during the lavender harvest.
Photo: Alison Child

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she gave the plant to Dowling. There wasn't enough root to make the Munstead grow and it was the wrong time of year to do cuttings, but Dowling and her husband took 500.

"From one plant we ended up with a whole field!" Dowling exclaims, still thrilled with the farming feat. "It was plant magic propagation!"

It was also the start of a successful business.

Dowling's first crop filled two wheelbarrows. Butchart Gardens soon caught wind that the farm was producing authentic English lavender and said if Dowling could get her yield up to 45 pounds, they would buy the lot from her instead of England and give her the same price. It took a few years to get to that level and the national historic site sold her lavender in the gift shop for more than five years.

"It's one of those bad luck, good luck stories," Dowling says of Butchart Gardens cancelling its order, adding that it allowed her to open up her business to other clients.

Happy Valley has since filled orders from as far away as a spa in

Thailand and has supplied popular businesses such as Lululemon, which bought her entire crop to make lavender eye pillows one year. Orders regularly come in from wedding planners across North America, who use lavender for everything from scenting invitations to flavouring champagne. "In the language of flowers, lavender stands for devotion," explains Dowling, who grows white lavender, among about 35 other varieties. Happy Valley also supplies Vancouver Island businesses such as Wild Fire Bakery, Sooke Harbour House and Feys and Hobbs Catered Arts.

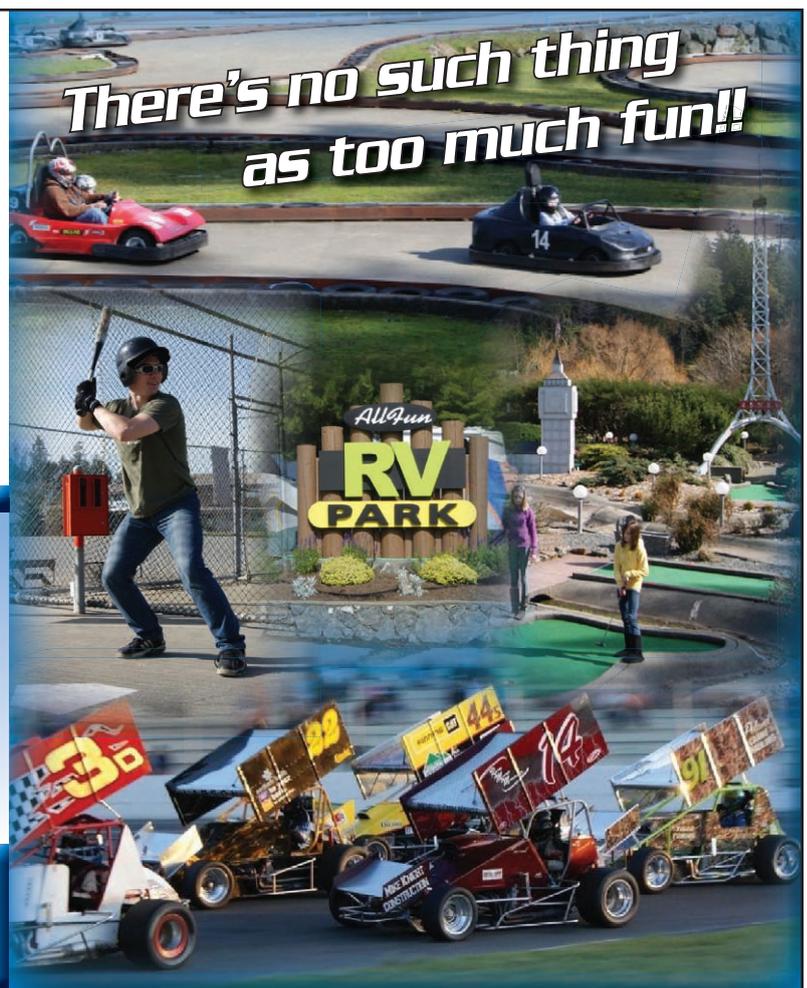
On weekends from April through August, the public is invited to visit the farm to experience the sight and smell of rows upon rows of fresh lavender and explore the historic property. Tucked behind a tall, thick cedar hedge planted by Dowling's grandfather, Happy Valley brings together the old and the new: a 1910 chicken coop now used as a drying shed for lavender stands just steps away from a new gift shop with a green roof. The property also features stunning display gardens — including a lavender garden in the shape of a butterfly — that offer endless ideas of what to do in your own yard.



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Lavender Amaratti Biscuits

Makes four dozen

Gluten free

Preheat oven to 375 F

INGREDIENTS

2 cups raw almonds (approx 450 grams)*

2 Tbsp dried lavender flowers, approx 4 grams
(3 Tbsp fresh)

1 1/3 cups granulated sugar

1 1/2 tsp icing sugar

2/3 cup egg whites only (4-5 egg whites)

2 tsp almond extract

*Pre-skinned or blanched almonds can be purchased,
check for freshness, toast as below.

METHOD

To de-skin the almonds: In a heat-proof bowl, pour boiling water over almonds to cover, let sit one minute, drain and cover with cold water. Drain again. Skins should slide off easily. Pat almonds dry. Place on a cookie sheet and carefully toast in the oven three to four minutes, stir every couple of minutes. Cool.

Place almonds, sugars and lavender in a food processor and blend very fine. In a separate bowl, whip egg whites until very stiff. Fold egg whites into nut mix with almond extract to form paste-like batter.

Using a melon scoop or rounded teaspoon, place small spoonfuls of batter on a parchment paper-lined cookie sheet, allowing room for cookies to spread as they bake.

Bake 10 to 12 minutes until bottoms are golden.

Cool before packing in airtight tin.

If you like what you see, but don't want to do the dirty work, Dowling also works in clients' private gardens, does consulting and hosts workshops. "That way, I can keep groceries on the table — other than lavender," she jokes. "BC Hydro isn't going to take mint as payment."

The best time to visit the farm is just before the July harvest, as the blue, mauve and purple hues emerge and the air smells sweet. Dowling hosts a special event every harvest, welcoming up to 100 people to the farm to join in picking the lavender and celebrating with a band and potluck dinner. (Please contact Dowling to be put on the invitation list.)

A final memory comes to mind for Dowling as she stands under her grandfather's apple tree, which still bears fruit. "Every year, we bring a bed out here," she says of the quirky tradition of dragging out her grandmother's iron bed. "It's our signature. The children used to sleep in it every year when it was lavender time." She looks around and nods slightly.

"We've had a lot of good times out here. A lot of laughter. And lots of lavender. Pounds and pounds of lavender!" ^{WS}

Learn more about Happy Valley Lavender and Herb Farm at www.happyvalleylavender.com.