

A whole lot of lavender
Man starts sweet-smelling commercial operation
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Article Text:

There's a new farmer in town, and if all goes according to Michael Richters' plan, he'll be the finest smelling one around.

Richters is turning a 5-acre field behind his home east of U.S. 287 into Boulder County's - and the state's - first commercial lavender farm. On Sunday, he planted 18,000 plants he hopes will become a fragrant and lucrative crop in coming months.

"If nothing else, people can come out and enjoy the setting and pick their own," Richters said.

Ideally, he said, products like oils, soaps and tea will also come from his venture, Colorado Mountain Lavender.

Richters spent a decade in the world of financial advising, and said the industry just wasn't "the right fit" for him. It was at a training session in Minneapolis where he discovered lavender. He was having a hard time sleeping and used lavender oil. It worked, and Richters started thinking about the large field behind his home.

He started researching and quickly discovered that the Front Range climate is ideal for lavender. He then conducted soil tests, and spent time learning more about the plant famous for its role in perfumes, aromatherapy and accenting gardens everywhere.

Despite his background in financial advising and commodities, Richters is no stranger to crop production.

"I grew up on a 3,000-acre farm in Nebraska," he said.

He worked on the farm with his father for 10 years following high school. The family still raises cattle and grows corn along with high-quality alfalfa.

The lavender market is largely untapped in Colorado, despite the fact that the region's sunny and dry climate suits the hardy plant perfectly.

Colorado State University extension agent Adrian Card, who works with farmers in Boulder County, said he's not aware of any lavender farms in the region.

"I'm sure there are individuals who do some lavender production, but probably none that do a large area of production - and anything above one-quarter acre is a whole lot of lavender."

The Colorado Department of Agriculture also has no record of any lavender farms in the state.

Richters said he wants that to change.

“My hope is that other people will also want to do it,” Richters said. “I have ideas for other spots.”

In southeastern Texas, one small lavender farm that started eight years ago led to nine more in the region.

Hill Country Lavender got started in 1999 when Robb Kendrick and Jeannie Ralston experimented with the plants. They thrived, and soon people were coming to see their field and pick lavender. The farm is now in its eighth year of production. In addition to picking, the public also enjoys jams, teas, gourmet salts, candles, oils and soaps sold at the farm.

“It snowballed,” said Tasha Brieger, the new owner of Hill Country Lavender. “It started out as this little tiny snowball and turned into this avalanche.”

Up to 8,000 people are expected this week for the third annual Blanco, Texas, Lavender Festival, which includes tours and seminars for people interested in the business.

Richters attended a seminar there and said he learned a lot about the business. He plans to grow five varieties of lavender and is already talking to area businesses about using his plants for teas and aromatherapy oils. He is also working on getting certified as an organic farm.

Although the business isn't extremely lucrative, Brieger said lavender production can sustain itself and that there is a large desire for the products it yields.

In Texas, the idea is catching on quickly. There are now more than 30 lavender farms in the state, Brieger said. Other popular areas include central Washington and Northern California.

“Our philosophy is the more the merrier,” Brieger said.