

JUL 08 2009

Allen's P. C. B. Est. 1888

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'Who will buy my sweet lavender?'



LINDA OF LONDON

The Metropolitan Market atop of Queen Anne Hill is having a lavender festival. Memories of lavender fields awaiting harvest under the sun linger on

nostalgically. In this corner of Northwest Norfolk – located in East Anglia – is an unforgettable sight in July.

Purple and gold blossoms the field of Heacham, for there, surrounded by acres of ripening wheat, are the lavender fields of England. Interspersed among the bushes shine patches of marigolds to add their brilliant gold to the have of purple.

Purple and gold are royal colors, and in the time of Elizabeth I lavender was used as a seasoning for roast lamb in place of mint. A century later they admired it for its medicinal and aromatic qualities.

It was said to quiet the "pains of head and brain which proceed

from cold, apoplexy, falling-sickness, the dropsy or sluggish malady, cramps, convulsions, palsies and often faintings. It strengthens the stomach and frees the liver and spleen from obstruction." Now satin pillows filled with lavender offer sweet repose and sweet dreams.

But not all lavender is the same. It doesn't even smell exactly the same. All shapes, sizes and colors are planted in Norfolk, from the deepest purple to the palest pink and white. Plants may be stubby or neat or bushy. Leaves vary from thick and dark to silvery or thin and pale green.

At harvest time the lavender is picked and trimmed with a

machine that makes light work of what used to take 40 women in one day to cover. The harvest lasts about five weeks, beginning (most years) in the latter part of June. Huge sacks arrive at the drying sheds, still buzzing with eager bees from the field.

The finest bunches are bound for the florists, and the heads of the others are chopped off for drying or distilling with oil, a pungent potion that pervades everything it touches. From there it goes to scent the soaps, sachets and solutions they have made Norfolk lavender famous.

There is also lavender grown at Sandringham House, a royal residence, started by Queen Alexandra, the Danish consort of

Edward VII (Queen Elizabeth's eldest son).

The phrase "laid up in lavender" is a recollection of the time when laundresses laid sprigs of lavender between the newly dried sheets to give them a sweet smell while staying in the cupboard.

The monks grew it around the monasteries, although presumably not for obstetrical purposes mentioned, nor for "trembling and passions of the heart" for which it was suggested as a soothing remedy. They grew it to attract the bees.

The Gothic novelists could scarcely do without the lavender

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water beloved of their much-besieged heroines for bathing their temples either before or after the scenes of heartbreak or disaster.

We tend to think of lavender being part of any self-respecting English garden, familiar even in Shakespeare's time. But lavender is even older than that. It may have originated in the Mediterranean, and the Romans brought it with them to ancient Britain for their famous baths in order to have a supply on hand.

A legend from early Christian times has it that once upon a time lavender had no scent. Then, the

Virgin Mary dried the swaddling clothes of the Infant Jesus on the bushes outside Nazareth, and since that day lavender has been blessed with its heavenly perfume.

Before the World War II, lavender was grown in an area south of London known as Michum. But since the 1930s Norfolk has taken on the purple mantle as the lavender growing area. The sandy spoil is inhospitable to many plants, but lavender loves it, feeling as at home on the dry slopes of the south of France as in other parts of the Mediterranean.

Given a handful of lime stone and a balanced fertilizing through the season of flowering, both climate and soil are suitable for the cultivation of lavender in the area. The plant requires a well-drained, alkaline soil, because otherwise it will get homesick for the chalk soils of Norfolk. It also likes plenty of sun, and there are many a Seattleite who would plant it this year if only to bring on the summer sun for encouragement.

So don't forget to visit the Metropolitan Market for your sweet lavender and enjoy an old tradition. TTFN until next time.

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