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The fragrant path to lavender farming in coastal Maine



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The fragrant path to lavender farming in coastal Maine

It is high summer and everyone is putting up their Independence Day bunting. But at Glendarragh Farm in Appleton, Maine, early July brings a very different sort of buzz. Literally, the Costigan family can hear the Fourth of July coming by the hum of bees going about their daily labors: July is when their lavender is in high prime, drawing pollinators to pay court. By midsummer, Glendarragh is knee deep in an intoxicatingly aromatic purple haze. Wade through their four acres of lavender, and the scent is enough to make you swoon. Farming never smelled so good.

Lorie and Patrick Costigan did not have a sudden aha moment that led to lavender. Instead, they had edged in that direction their entire lives. Lorie figures she started moving toward lavender at age five. That is when most of her friends spent weekends plunked down in front of the television for their weekly dose of cartoons. However, in Lorie's case, she would bide her time, waiting out the animated programming until *Victory Garden* and *This Old House* aired. Those were the shows that left her spellbound.

WRITTEN BY TOVAH MARTIN
PHOTOGRAPHED BY LYNN KARLIN





Born in Camden, Maine, Lorie's interaction with gardening while growing up was not totally vicarious. Although she had to fight against the prevailing trend toward lawn supremacy in her youth, she found plenty of kindred spirits to talk gardening with in the local horticulturally savvy enclave. And she took full advantage of her opportunities to rub shoulders with some of the region's finest green thumbs. Ask Lorie about the roots of her obsession, and she mentions mentors such as Mary Ellen and Ervin Ross of Merry Gardens. Volunteering at their Camden nursery brought expanded knowledge of growing and propagating, thanks to Ervin who taught her the fundamentals. At that point, she was intrigued by perennials of all sorts but also felt the nascent rustlings of a fascination for the fragrance of herbs. Alda Stich, who grew a garden filled with fragrant flowers to fill wedding bouquets, was another mentor nudging her in the redolent direction. When Lorie found the classic herbal resource The Fragrant Year by Helen Van Pelt Wilson and Léonie Bell at Stone Soup, a used bookstore in Camden, she was hooked.

All that herbal input was lying just below the surface in Lorie Costigan's mind in 2007 when the couple decided that they wanted to create a legacy that would touch their children for the rest of their lives. At the time, they had two sons, Sam and Hugh (Des, their youngest, came later). "We wanted to do something as a family," Lorie recalls. "I was a newspaper editor

and Patrick worked in a bank. It seems as though we were always going to activities and sports events," she recalls of juggling quality family time against commitments. "It's so easy for time to be absorbed. We wanted to build something together." That's when they found the 27-acre farm in nearby Appleton. Patrick Costigan hails from County Kildare in Ireland and the 1824 farm immediately felt like home for him. "It is a place back in time," Lorie recalls of the moment she first saw the farm and felt its romance.

Naming the property came automatically for Patrick, who called it Glendarragh—Gaelic for "glen of the oaks." That name was his initial reaction as the couple walked the hayfields fronting the St. George River with oaks forming a barrier from the winds. Originally, the farm was 100 acres as "farmland was sold in 100-acre increments," Lorie explains. Previously owned by the same family for five generations, the dairy farm was sold in 1960. The property went through a series of brief owners and the land was in the process of being divided in 2007 when the Costigans bought their 27-acre parcel with a farmhouse and the original post and beam barn. Beyond the oak trees, the only cultivated plants in residence were a lonesome trio of hostas, the remaining vestiges from the efforts of a former farmer's wife.





Clockwise from left: Three-year-old Des gains speed rushing through 20-inch-tall rows of 'Hidcote' and 'Munstead' lavender. | The three-storey, 1790 barn can dry several floors of hanging lavender bundles. The taller 'Grosso' lavender is sweeter than other varieties. | The whole family gets into the act when it is time to harvest the fields beside the house, which flies the American, Irish, and Maine flags. | Facing page: Bundled fistful by fistful in the field, the lavender goes into the barn to be hung on chains for drying.





Surrounded by wineries, the region had a tradition of agriculture. But grapes were not what the Costigans had in mind, although they did take one cue from the vineyards and wanted a crop that was long-lived and would not require replanting. Based on Lorie's previous interaction with herbs, they went straight for lavender.

As it turned out, lavender loves their land. Although the prevailing blueberries are a testament to the acid pH of the soil, the Costigans found that amending with lime and organic compost did the trick to get the earth up to speed for their herbal crop. They started with 300 plants installed in raised rows with gravel between the beds (they now use landscape fabric to repel weeds). And the entire family devoted spare time to nurturing the herbs—weeding, harvesting, and pruning the long, spiky battalions of lavender that cover the land in purple. With the raving success of their initial crop, the family added more plants every year, purchasing and propagating additional material. Currently, thousands of lavender plants grace the land, sending their perfume floating through the fields when the midsummer sun warms the farm.

Grown for a cut crop rather than for oil production, Glendarragh Farm plants both English and French lavender. In the English lavender category, they grow *Lavandula angustifolia* 'Hidcote', 'Betty's Blue', 'Melissa Lilac', 'Jean Davis', 'Folgate', 'Coconut Ice', 'Fashionably Late', and

'Munstead'. Most English varieties winter successfully and thrive thanks to a late season pruning to cut away wood that might desiccate in winter winds. The pruning is particularly critical for 'Munstead', which grows unwieldly and irreparably woody without conscientious shearing. They also experimented with lavandin, *Lavandula* x *intermedia*, which can be dicey in their zone 5 location but endures well with the help of poly tunnels and the microclimate created by the ridge running along the river, shouldering the brunt of northwest winds. The resident lavandin cultivars include *Lavandula* x *intermedia* 'Grosso', 'White Grosso', 'Fred Boutin', and 'Super'. Often used in cleaning products, they impart a more astringent scent than the English varieties. Needless to say, Lorie has become the region's lavender expert and lectures to garden clubs and horticultural groups on the subject.

The lavender season begins late in coastal Maine, leading to considerable anxiety for the Costigans as they await the fate of their lavender crop. The lupines and delphiniums are already gearing up for another year of beauty while the lavender remains dormant. Finally, when Memorial Day rolls around, the lavender begins showing signs of having survived another winter. "But it catches up quickly," Lorie says with relief. By the Fourth of July, the organically grown crop is ready for its first cutting. That is when an abundance of bees tips off the Costigans to ready their lavender sickles. "It's a







Clockwise from far left: Organza sachets. | Made of raw silk with organza pouches to hold the dried flowers, lavender sachet hanger covers are a traditional way to scent clothing. | Sachets are easy to slip into a drawer. | A fragrant place to sit. | Facing page: Lavandula x intermedia 'Super' and 'Fred Boutin' dwarf Adirondack chairs in the field.





sickle with one serrated edge. When we found this tool, it changed our lives." The sickle and rubber bands are their primary tools in this low-tech enterprise. The lavender is cut, bundled, and brought into the 1790 barn to hang from its rafters, where it is well ventilated and dark—conditions that the herbs require to dry properly. When the lavender is completely dry, it is sifted and ready for use in products sold by Glendarragh Farm.

Initially, Glendarragh Farm figured that it would sell its product solely at the Common Ground Country Fair, an annual event held in Unity, Maine, and sponsored by the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA). But the lavender endeavor proved so successful that the farm now sells its products at a shop in Camden, as well as through their website, mainelavender.com. In addition to dried bundles of lavender, they also sell lavender laundry detergent, sachets, soy candles, hand creams, salves, and buckwheat pillows, sometimes mixing the lavender with homegrown lemon verbena, rose geranium, and rosemary.

Meanwhile, the three lonesome hostas at Glendarragh have been joined by four sizable perennial borders filled with blossoms and foliage. Between all the chores inherent in the upkeep of the crops as well as gardens to feed the soul, the Costigans have more than ample opportunity to spend time outdoors together. Not only does their plan strengthen the family's bond, but it also forges a relationship with the land. As a result, Sam is pursuing his interest in organic vegetable

gardening at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, after an internship at Eliot Coleman's Four Season Farm in Harborside, Maine. In addition, Hugh and Des have developed a kinship for the farm and spend time in the fields after school. Patrick works on the farm in his spare time and Lorie tends the gardens, fields, and store full time. During the harvest, friends and neighbors help with the labor.

By midsummer the fields are breathtaking—fulfilling all the senses. Long rows of lavender mounds bristle with blue, white, and purple blooms ruffled by the breezes and shimmering in the sun that is essential to their glowing health. Thanks to the Costigans' method of harvesting at just the right moment, coupled with their careful drying and storing processes, Glendarragh Farm lavender has its own deliciously pungent scent that captures the sparkle in a coastal summer. Discovering how to maximize that scent and share its brilliance remains part of the journey for the Costigans. Lorie sums up what the family learned from lavender. "This farm taught us that you can put your mind and heart into an endeavor and create something wonderful and magical," she says. "Everything here is connected and grounded." As for the popularity of their product, she has a theory to explain why customers are fascinated by Glendarragh lavender. "There's a story here, and it resonates."

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