

# GROWERTALKS

## Under an Acre

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### For the Love of Lavender

*Anne-Marie Hardie*



Entrepreneurship seems to be in Sonja Richards' genes. A teacher by profession, Sonja has also self-published two successful children's books and began a magazine, which promoted the downtown Michigan businesses.

Her husband Bret Richards began Harbor View Nurseries in 1993 and Sonja worked by his side watching the business grow. During the busy season, spring to about July 4, the nursery was

extremely successful, but the Richards felt that they needed something to fill the gap for the slower season. Located at the end of the peninsula in Traverse, Michigan, this region has now become home to several wineries, drawing in tourists. Sonja knew that she needed a business that would appeal to this clientele and so they turned to lavender. Today, the lavender business has grown to just more than 2 acres.

#### Learning about lavender

Not afraid to try something new, Sonja delved right into the lavender business, learning everything she could about these wonderfully scented perennials. Her previous careers in publishing taught her a lot about marketing and advertising. Sonja was surprised how much more she learned from expanding into the lavender market. In the beginning, they learned about lavender by asking a lot of questions, finding people that could help them and experimenting. With the lavender, Sonja and Richard were careful to plan out this new venture carefully, pacing themselves and learning about its possibilities.

Despite the harshness of last year's winter, Harbor View's Lavender Farm was largely unaffected. "We talked to a lot of people further south—Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, southern Michigan, even—who had had a lot of loss, but they didn't have the snow cover that we had," said Sonja. "They've still got those cold, cold temperatures, but I think the snow really helped blanket us and we're nestled in between two bays, Grand Traverse Bays off of Lake Michigan."

Over the years, the Richards found that the English lavender variety tends to fare much better in their area than the French. The cooler summer this year also had an impact on the strength of the second bloom. Over the years, Sonja has learned that the one thing you can't control is the weather, so it's important to adapt and

accept its unpredictable nature.

## Encouraging beautiful blooms

Working with lavender is all about timing, paying attention to the bud and its blooming schedule. The plants are harvested before the bud breaks to reap the full benefits of both the scent and the plant itself.

In July, the perennial is cut back before it goes to seed in order to encourage a second bloom. “That’s the one thing that most people don’t know, so they end up with these huge, gangly, out-of-control plants,” said Sonja. “Ours are just all in nice little mounds and people are amazed when they pull up and see how controlled they are.”

During the cutting season, the Richards hire 10 people to help with the process. There’s a short window of time for cutting because the lavender needs to be cut before it opens. During this two-week period, the majority of the lavender is cut by hand, banded and then dried in the 30,000 sq. ft. pole barn that was once used to store boats. Now, most of the space is allocated to drying the lavender. The drying process takes approximately two and half weeks. Some of the lavender will eventually be turned into oil, while others will be used for wreaths, dried bouquets, sachets and for culinary use. The uncut lavender is left for the bees to pollinate and make lavender honey.

## Expanding the business of lavender

Sonja didn’t stop with growing the lavender; they decided to expand the business and develop a series of lavender products. Evolving the business to include products just seemed natural. In fact, she admits that one day she simply just started using the dried stubs to make sachets and selling both dried and fresh bouquets.

The body products were a bit more challenging. Sonja admits that it took almost a year to discover a solid soap recipe that both she and her customers liked. Today, the lavender products include skin, home and even culinary. A huge feat, since all of the products are homemade in Sonja’s kitchen.

The culinary products are always a topic of conversation.

“They see the food and they’re like, ‘Really? You can eat lavender?’” said Sonja. “So we’ll often have samples so people can try it to see what it tastes like.”

Sonja hopes to soon offer her customers a book about lavender that will not only include some basic facts, but recipes and other tips to make lavender a part of everyday life. All of the products are made with natural ingredients so that their customers don’t have to worry about what’s going on their skin or into their home.

Having these products has opened the doors to other markets, including farmer’s markets and online. Their two children also help out at the farm cutting lavender, bagging and tagging soap and sachets and assisting at the farmer markets.

“It’s a good experience for them and they both have a very entrepreneurial spirit, which is really fun to see,” said Sonja. “They’re always trying to come up with things that can sell. They’re very out-of-the-box-thinking kids, which is good. It’s a really good thing.”

In the cooler months, Sonja relies on the online sales as their primary source of income. Christmas is always a great season for sales, but Sonja would like to see this process expanded to even a few orders a week. Today, the business continues to expand, opening up their lavender and now balsam product line to the wholesale market. Currently, their products can be found in Flowerland, a nursery in Grand Rapids, and they're in the process of finalizing a few other wholesale clients and developing a product catalog to expand this part of the business. Regarding balsam, this is still in the initial stages with only five products, but Sonja's already thinking of expansion.

Sonja's hope is to expand the business even further, using space outside the home to make her products. This would give a bit of separation from her home and business pursuits while allowing Sonja to hire some additional employees to assist with the product making.

"People stop by all the time and think that it would be so great to have a lavender farm and they're people who are on the edge of retirement," said Sonja. "Yes, it is great to have lavender. It's a lot of fun, it smells good, but it is a lot of work."

In order to be a successful lavender grower, you need the space, time and the market, recommends Sonja. But as Sonja has shown, you also need the passion. Sonja and her family are fully committed to lavender—eating, living and breathing the product. In fact, they're so immersed that they can no longer smell it, but they do notice it's positive effects, creating both a relaxing home environment and a thriving business. **GT**

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