



A moment of inspiration turned a Montreal couple into tried-and-true lavender farmers. Welcome to a little slice of heaven called Joie de Lavande farm.

# Field of dreams

BY JOANNA BECKET

**W**e've all experienced aha! moments in our lives when our perceptions shift, time skips a beat and life is never quite the same again. Such a moment occurred for Alison Marks in the summer of 2005 when she first visited Bleu Lavande, a 45-acre lavender farm in the town of Fitch Bay, in Quebec's Eastern Townships, the first operation to successfully grow lavender in Quebec. Wandering the fragrant purple fields and swept away by the extraordinary beauty of it all ("I was knocked off my feet!" she exclaims), Alison soon enlisted her husband Christopher in her newfound passion, then they set out to open their own lavender farm in the neighbouring town of Knowlton.

As empty nesters, Alison, a marketing executive in Montreal, and Christopher, who had worked in sales, felt it was time for a change. "It was a choice for going forward," Alison explains. "For years we bounced around haphazardly between jobs, children, moves and acquisitions. Now, we wanted to create a lifestyle for ourselves in the country. 'How do we want to spend the next 30 years of our lives?' we asked ourselves." Inspired by the idea of a lavender farm, they first had to see if they could make it work.

## Multiple choices

Sonia Ricotti, a personal coach and president of Lead Out Loud, advises people facing major changes in their lives: "Everybody has dreams, but life happens and we get busy. Often, we forget about our dreams because we're just trying to survive. If you're about to have a huge life change, step back and get clarity. Ask, what do I really want to do now, what does my greatest life look like?" It's important, she insists, to "dream big. Be unrealistic. Decide what you want and the answers will come to you. Everything will fall into place."

## On the road

Their quest began the following April as they headed to the

west coast. It was the town of Sequim, Washington, home to a thriving community of lavender farms that gave them the business model they desired – many of the farms were tiny with the ‘artisanal’ feeling they were looking for. Christopher called all the Sequim farmers listed in a local brochure; they graciously opened their doors and shared information about the business.

(A 10-day trip to Provence, France the following year was

Left: lavender sprigs for sale. Below: boutique, open for business; Alison's flower offering for the local farmers' market.



equally rewarding. They followed the official ‘Lavender Roads’ map, knocked on farmers’ doors throughout the region and were greeted like family. “It felt like we were coming home,” recalls Alison enthusiastically.)

### Back to earth

Back home from Sequim, the couple, who’d always summered nearby, found the land they needed – a sunny, 6-acre lot on the outskirts of Knowlton they call Joie de Lavande (Lavender Bliss) farm. Around this time, Alison also signed up to be the sole flower vendor at Knowlton’s new open-air farmers’ market, a job she describes as “a great joy.” She has since added lavender to her offering and is now known locally as ‘the Flower Lady’.

From the start, things moved quickly. Within a few weeks, they bought the property and started converting the land, bringing in truckloads of gravel to create the arid conditions lavender needs to thrive. At first, they purchased strains of lavender known to survive Quebec winters; now, they propagate their own cuttings and sell mature 1- and 2-year-old plants. Building a greenhouse is part of their long-term plan; so is adding 2,000 pesticide-free plants to the 1,000 already planted. Last summer, they created an ‘interpretative’ garden; this year, they’ll add a labyrinth, beehives, and, Alison says excitedly, a ‘woods walk’ beyond the stream. “Our intention is to create little vignettes, moments of discovery that’ll take your breath away as you follow the path through the woods.”

### Simple abundance

Joie de Lavande opened for business in July 2007, and now hums with activity seven days a week (June to mid-October). Visitors are invited to explore the pathways, have a picnic, laze by the spring-fed pond, or shop the boutique for all things lavender – scented soaps, sachets, essential oils – all sourced locally. Or, they can lounge on the deck sipping lavender lemonade or eating lavender ice cream. “We want our farm to be experiential,” explains Chris. “When you come here, you can taste, see, touch, smell and experience the lavender.”

## LIFESTYLE

### Just rewards

As the property evolves, each new element is designed to help create a sense of destination, a place where people come to relax and unwind.

“Lavender’s the herb known to release tension and induce relaxation,” says Alison. “We want our farm to reflect that – to be a calming, peaceful place...a balm

*“We want our farm to be experiential. You come, taste, see, touch, smell, and experience the lavender.”*

for the soul. We feel blessed to have this property so we invite people to wander around, poke about. They say, ‘It’s beautiful. I feel so refreshed’.”

This is a choice made not for financial freedom, but for a life that’s rich, nonetheless. Christopher, who calls himself ‘the Accidental Gardener’ says: “What’s great is we’re doing all the things we love

to do. We love nature and have always liked working with our hands, creating beauty from nothingness. Now, we’re able to share this pleasure. It’s a wonderful reward.”

Sonia Ricotti is impressed. “It’s hard for people to dream big, but this is what the Markses were able to do. It’s completely outside the box. They had a dream. They said, ‘Wow, imagine living on a lavender farm!’ And they made their dream come true...Sometimes your greatest life is just around the corner,” she says with certainty. **H&L**