

For the love of lavender

Cliff and Michelle Curtis discovered the soil on their Baker Valley farm is ideal for the flowers

By Lisa Britton

For the Baker City Herald

Cliff Curtis doesn't like to say he raises flowers.

Yet the rows of purple lavender waving in the late summer breeze belie his claim.

Curtis does raise flowers — he has 2,000 lavender plants on his property along Pocahontas Road in Baker Valley.

But the blossoms aren't the only part of the business.

"I never thought I'd grow flowers. I claim to be in the oil business," he said.

Cliff and his wife, Michelle, prepared the soil for 100 plants in 2016. He calls it his test plot.

"Just to see if this was something I wanted to do," he said.

His reason for researching lavender was to find a crop that didn't require so much time.

"I was getting tired of doing livestock — the 24/7 part of it," he said.

Then he remembered seeing a lavender farm near Condon, which has a similar climate to Baker Valley.

Lavender, he discovered, likes well-drained rocky soil.

"That's all we've got," Cliff said.

The plant prefers soil on the dry side, which alleviates the need for extensive irrigation, and requires at least seven hours of sunlight daily.

Lavender, with its strong scent, is not palatable to gophers or deer.

"The deer don't like it — that was huge," Cliff said.

One critter will munch it, though. "Voles do like it quite a bit," he said.

He lost 19 of his 100 plants to voles the first year — 19% of his crop.

Although the varieties of lavender he buys are rated for Zone 5, Baker Valley winters sometimes



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Cliff Curtis examines a sample of lavender oil he and his wife, Michelle, distill from the flowers they grow on their Elkhorn Peak Lavender farm in Baker Valley.

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— Cliff Curtis, who produces oil from his 2,000 lavender plants

take a toll, especially if there isn't snow to insulate against frigid temperatures.

"I still get a little winter kill," he said.

The Curtis property now has 2,000 plants in its fourth season. The couple planted both French and English varieties.

The flowers bloom in various shades of purple, although some types produce white blossoms.

The French varieties are known to produce more oil; English laven-

der is used for culinary purposes.

Last year Cliff loaded his pickup with lavender cuttings and hauled it to the Portland area to be distilled for oil.

"I came home with a quart," he said.

He wasn't convinced there was a local market for lavender products.

"I wasn't sure if it would sell, but people loved it," he said.

The Curtises sell under the name Elkhorn Peak Lavender, an

homage to the mountains looming as a backdrop to the property. They've sold products at local farmers markets and individually to be used in skin care items.

After the Portland trip, Cliff decided to invest in his own equipment to distill the oil.

He bought a traditional copper still made in Portugal by a company that's been in the business since 1837.

He starts distilling in July when plants have 50% to 100% bloom. The flower buds contain the most oil, but some is extracted from the leaves and stems as well.

The still is placed over a propane burner with water contained



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Cliff Curtis is experimenting with various varieties of lavender. Some have purple flowers; others are white.

in the bottom bulb. The center piece is stuffed with lavender collected from about 28 plants.

As the water turns to steam, it rises through the lavender and releases the oil.

The steam, now containing oil particles, moves through a tube called the "bird's beak" and through coils inside another copper container full of cold water.

As the steam condenses into liquid form, the oil rises to the top and drips through a tube into a beaker.

The water flows into a five-gallon container. This is called hydrosol — or floral water — because it still contains a bit of lavender oil.

Cliff collects 8 to 12 ounces of oil from each distillation.