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FreeRange

Shop Well – Eat Well – Live Well



LOVE FOR LAVENDER

**Valentine's Day
treats from Britain's
BEST confectioners**

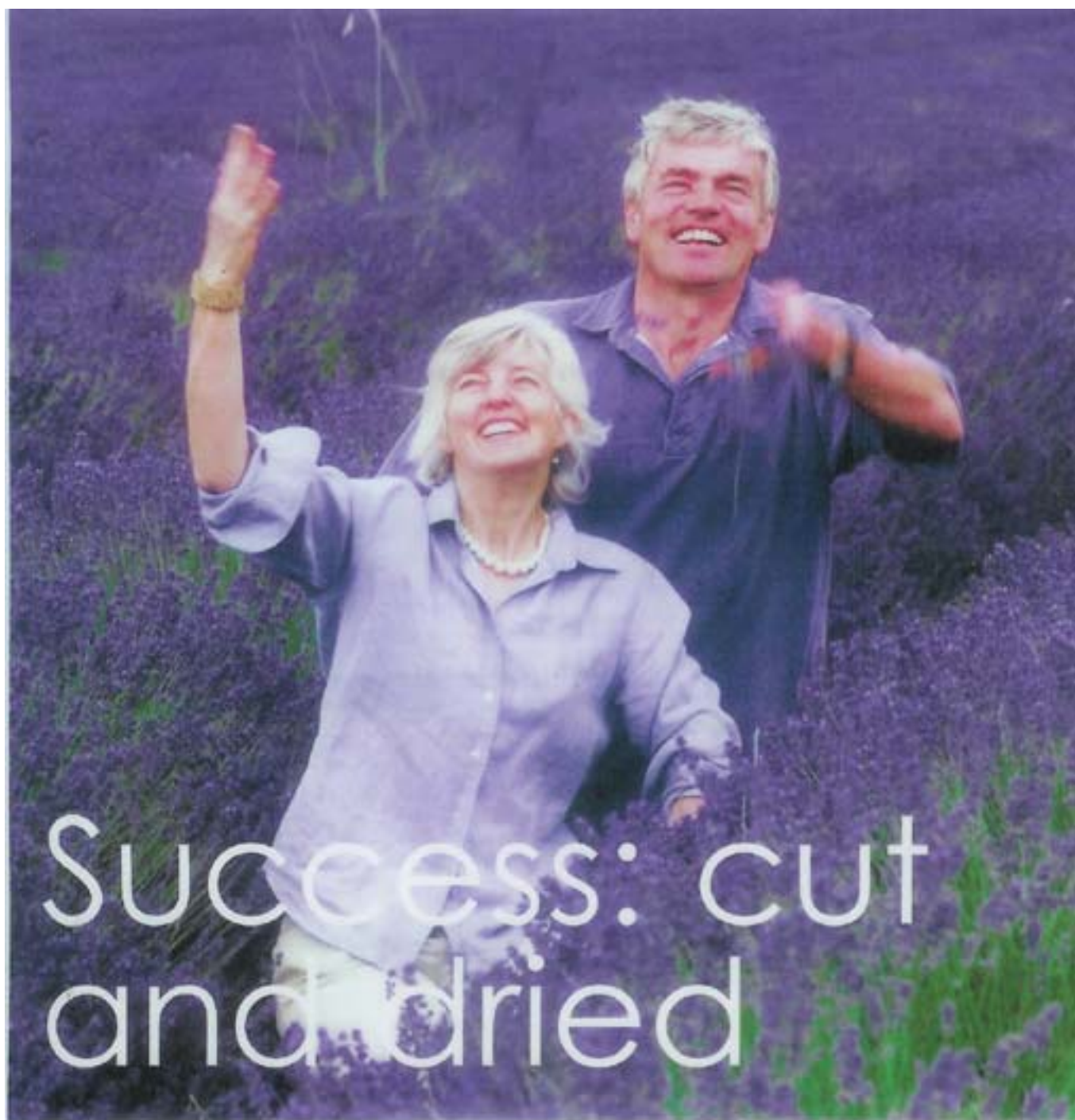
Romantic SEASONAL
SUPPERS for TV

PLUS

5-page FARMERS' MARKET DIRECTORY, Isle of Mull cheese,
FARMER'S CHOICES, REGIONAL DRINKS

ISSN 1





Success: cut and dried



Rachel Delahaye is romanced by a lavender and dried flower farm in the Kent countryside

Ah, the smell of the country... Something even city-slickers would say with real sincerity in the surrounds of Castle Farm, nr Shoreham, in Sevenoaks, Kent.

And the reason? Lavender – lots of it. It's the farm's most high-profile crop, and through a combination of colour and smell (which attracts passing drivers), word of mouth and simple curiosity, hundreds of people swarm through the doors of the on-site farm shop, The Hop Shop, every year.

The shop is so named because of the first crop that it sold, and hop bines flourish on the farm. However, when the hops-for-beer industry wilted in the 1970s due to brewing competition from abroad, it became a sobering time for the Kent hop growers, and Castle Farm owners Caroline and William Alexander began selling hops as decorative garland strands, dried for longevity, instead.

"Local people had always known how fabulous hops were for adorning pub kitchens and churches," says Caro-



"But we thought it was about time the rest of the country caught up. We were the first to market it here."

While interior designers and florists went mad for the hops, the Alexanders realised they still had to diversify to compete with Holland's keen horticulturists, so they broke new ground by drying artichokes, sunflowers and peonies, and other unusual blooms emerged from the hothouse as dried flower specialities. Five Golds at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show later, and it looked like the future was cut-and-dried.

But it was just the beginning. "It became clear to us that it would make sense to look into the essential oils market," says Caroline. "So we, along with other Kentish growers, began looking at which plants would suit our soil types." The Darenth Valley's poor clay-with-flints soil made the obvious choices rosemary, German chamomile and, of course, one particularly hardy, purple, Mediterranean plant. Castle Farm is now the second biggest lavender grower in the UK with 55 acres of *lavandula angustifolia* – much sought after for perfumery – and lavandin, a vigorous hybrid producing

No shrinking vio

– The name 'lavender' is thought to come from 'lavare', a latin verb which means 'to wash'. The Egyptians used the plant for cosmetics and embalmers, while the Romans used lavender in pomades and ointments.

– In the First World War, when antiseptics were low, the public was asked to gather up lavender so it could be used to dress war wounds. Today, it is still used by some for bites, minor wounds and burns.

– In the 19th century, many believe that where lavender grew, there was fairy activity. It was common practice for a bride to braid lavender into her hair to retain female power and luck. Country wives' suggested that rubbing your face with lavender oil would attract a husband and couples that placed lavender between their bed sheets would never quarrel.

– In the Tudor and Elizabethan eras, lavender was increasingly used for flavouring for dishes, and it was a particular favourite of Queen Elizabeth I. It's reported that the gardeners were required to have lavender flowers available all year so they could be used to make Conserved Lavender (a mixture of lavender flowers and sugar) and lavender tisane (a drink made with lavender flowers, boiling water and honey). Today, heads of lavender are still used in herbal tea mixes, which are used to relieve headaches, tiredness, exhaustion and tension.

– Lavender essence makes a wonderful addition to certain savoury sauces. In chicken with lemon and lavender, the essence and heads can be used in summer cakes and shortbread. The blossoms and leaves can also be used instead of rosemary.

– It works brilliantly with citrus and tart fruits such as rhubarb, gooseberries or plums. A few drops of the essence softens the tartness of the fruit and reduces the need for sweetening.

Opposite page: Caroline and William
This page, top and bottom: Caroline
never a chore at

