

# MONTGOMERY FARMS

## Infusing Montgomery with Lavender

*Meet the Family Behind Soleado Lavender Farm*



Hidden away in Dickerson is Soleado Lavender Farm, a family-owned farm offering handmade lavender products. Montgomery County is lucky enough to be home to the Soleado operation, one of only four lavender farms in the state of Maryland.

Sophia Watkins is the fourth generation in her family to own and operate the farm, although she's the first in the family to grow lavender. "My grandmother came from a farming family in Montgomery County. She sold her father's farm and turned around and bought this farm. A decision like that was very rare. That's usually the moment that a family would've gotten out of farming." A passion for working with the land was subsequently handed down to Sophia's father, and to Sophia in turn.

The Watkins family once grew grain, but when Sophia inherited the farm from her father, growing grain wasn't sustainable for the land itself. Rather than attempt to continue grain farming, Sophia looked to continue the family's tradition in a different way. "I saw the work that my father had done, the work that my grandmother had done in taking care of this

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particular farm, and wanted to find something that I could do, something that I could grow sustainably as a way of taking care of this farm." Stewardship of the land was Sophia's primary goal, so she considered alternative uses of the land that would keep it healthy and productive.

When asked why she chose to grow lavender, Sophia emphasized the sustainable aspects of the plant. "I was looking for something that would sustain the farm. So, it wasn't ever about lavender, it wasn't ever specifically about flowers, but it had to do with having a product that could be shelf-stable. It was so very important that we had a product that we could sell all year round as opposed to a fresh product that had to get to market."

Soleado's products include

lavender essential oil distilled from French or English lavender on the farm, dried lavender bouquets, lavender bud soap, bug spray, soy candles, sachets, lavender and lemon soap, lip balm, essential oil, and body lotion. They also offer small lavender plants in four-inch pots. Customers are welcome to purchase Soleado's products at the farm during the open season or order year-round through their website.

"We are a small-scale operation, so all of our production is done by hand." First, Sophia and her helpers harvest the mature lavender and set it out to dry. Some of this is used to make the bouquets that are sold as-is, which are used by some customers as decoration around the home. Some of the dried lavender is then made into dried buds, which is used to make the sachet packets and also for culinary purposes. "The other thing that we do with the fresh lavender when we first harvest it is make essential oil. The lavender goes directly into a distiller and we distill for essential oil, which is then stored for up to four months to cure, and then it goes into all of our products," said Sophia.

Although not yet certified organic, Soleado emphasizes sustainable and organic practices on the farm. As of 2018, 90% of the farm's products are produced from energy supplied by solar panels mounted on the roof of the main building. However, some of the equipment for distilling the lavender oil still requires oil or propane to operate.

The sweet fragrance of lavender floats on the wind when the plants are in bloom, and mixes with the scent of wildflowers near the small lake below the main house. A wildflower garden incorporates native plants and



SOLEADO LAVENDER FARM, COURTESY OF SOPHIA WATKINS



about the best way to use land in this area and at the end of the day, there's just always going to be a need for open space.”

Land prices and the affordability of maintaining a farming operation also present an enormous challenge, especially for new or younger farmers. “The cost of keeping buildings and the cost of taking care of property has changed. It used to be much easier to get somebody to repair certain things or to get farmer-to-farmer help, and now it's not just the farming but keeping up with a farm that is probably one of the biggest issues,” said Sophia.

attracts butterflies, bees, and birds, and is a favorite with visitors. Soleado participates in the Bee Friendly Farming initiative, which is a program organized by the Pollinator Partnership to help farmers and growers promote pollinator health on their lands. The wildflower garden is just one of Soleado's efforts to help bees thrive. Part of the initiative includes practicing integrated pest management, which means reducing and/or eliminating the use of chemicals to manage pests and invasive insects.

that we collected is now incredibly useful to other people and to ourselves. And it's been invaluable because ... with changes in weather, with other issues, we've had to use that as a point of reference to adjust.”

Although farming has been in her family for generations, Sophia acknowledges there may be challenges for future generations, with land use changes being among the top issues. “Take care of farmland, protect it, because once it's gone, it's gone. There's just no way around it. There's a lot of debate and a lot of talk

Some farmers will incorporate what's known as value-added products into their farming operation to maximize opportunities for profit and also to attract consumers to the farm. At Soleado, their value-added products are the body products Sophia and her helpers produce by hand. “If you go through the work of making value-added products, ideally you would start with food products; they're in some ways more universally saleable,” said Sophia. “But one reason that I started making body products instead of culinary products is because it is so

Farming is a discipline which makes heavy use of science and technology, which is not a background Sophia had when she first began the lavender farm. “I think coming to farming without much of a science and technology background, I don't think we use it enough.” One of the main challenges she faced when establishing Soleado was whether or not lavender could even be grown in Dickerson on a larger scale than one or two plants. “When we started and had no data on growing lavender on the East Coast, everything was a trial. Every plant we planted was a trial instead of a crop. And so that data





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difficult to get into any kind of food production, value-added food production, that I just ... went with a completely different set of products. And the fact that I have soap and lotion and essential oil is commentary about what the county offered at that time.”

When asked what she most wants the general public to know about farming, Sophia said, “I think that I want people to understand that it’s hard. There are parts of what we do that are surprisingly challenging in terms of the fact that we’re small-scale, the fact that all of our production is done by hand. And that’s something that we’re really proud of. There are people who come here who have an innate understanding of what that means and they cherish what they buy here because of it and they like being a part of that. There are other people who I think look at a farm and just see a beautiful place—which is the experience we want people to have—but they just see a beautiful place. I do believe that people need to know how hard farming is. That’s the only way they’ll understand how valuable their food is.”

Like many other growers in the

area, Sophia finds farming to be an overall enriching experience. “We have customers who come to our farm who tell us they’ve never been to a farm before, or they tell us that they’ve never walked on the grass barefoot before, or they don’t know where a natural scent comes from and are not connected to the idea that it comes from a plant. There is a lack of knowledge in terms of what farming is, and the ways that it intersects with and impacts their life. But what’s very interesting is that even those people who may not have any knowledge about farming are really receptive to learning about it. So, we find ourselves sort of thrust into this position sometimes of educating the public. This demonstrates to us that there’s a need beyond people wanting a bar of soap, there’s a need for having the farm open as well as selling a product.”

The picturesque and wild scenery of the farm is attractive to painters and photographers who want to capture landscapes, flowers, or wildlife in their art. Sophia welcomes artists to the farm for painting and photo sessions, including wedding and engagement photo shoots, but

reservations are required.

In addition to artists and creatives who feel inspired by the farm’s rustic scenery, Soleado also welcomes a number of events. Yoga on the Farm is a popular series of sessions, open to beginners and experienced practitioners alike. Periodically, Soleado hosts classes on caring for your own lavender plants at home, as well as classes on teas and herbs. The Heritage Harvest event, organized by Heritage Montgomery highlighting artisanal farms in the Ag Reserve, is a new event coming every October.

Visitors are encouraged to explore Soleado when the lavender is in season from June to July. The farm is open to visitors and tourists from May to July and again from September to the first week of November. Although the season for in-person visits is limited, online orders are accepted and fulfilled year-round.

Find out more about Soleado Lavender at their website, [www.soleadolavender.com](http://www.soleadolavender.com), or connect on Facebook and Instagram.

