

## Field of dreams

June 2, 2016 | Carmen Marie Fabio



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Build it and they will come. That's the mission statement of Champ de Rêves Garden Centre owner Mark Rassi as he prepares a 10-acre spread on the terrain of his St. Lazare facility to nurture the second annual crop of lavender and invites the public to the garden's grand opening July 2 to walk amongst the rows of purple blooms.

"A lot can be done with lavender," said Rassi of the non-invasive perennial plant that is a member of the mint family. "We have products derived from last year's crop including soaps, essential oils, hand creams, candles, and sachets."

Accessing the lavender garden, visitors will first walk through another 10-acre swath of pathways of a demonstration garden featuring a series of garden sculptures that are currently being crafted by staff and visiting artists at the Chemin Daoust location. Framework is in place for a 13-foot high horse, an octopus, and a spitting cobra, among other surprises, with the largest measuring about 70 feet in length.



"It's going to be as nice, or better, than the Botanical Gardens in Montreal," said Rassi of the grounds that will also include willow branch sculptures, archways, and a collection of a wide variety of evergreens.

Though the signature mauve flowers are not yet in bloom, the scent of lavender coming off the leaves itself is evident as soon as you walk onto the grounds. Nestled into a secluded spot behind the garden centre, Rassi is in the process of constructing a building dedicated to the cultivation and harvest of the lavender crop and the products made from its beloved leaves and petals. Planted in long rows six feet apart, visitors can easily meander through the thousands of shrubs and benefit from the intoxicating scent while area birds and bees enjoy the nectar.

"I'll also have bee hives set up on the grounds to produce lavender honey," said Rassi.

Lavender essential oils are known for their antiseptic and anti-inflammatory properties as well as for their fragrance being incorporated into perfumes and bath products, as well as sachets of dried buds that can retain their scent for years after being picked.

While some strains of the plant are used in the honey production, other consumables include candied flowers used in cake decoration. Sugar infused with lavender scent is used in baking and lavender is said to pair well with dark chocolate. And, like its minty cousin, its buds and leaves can also be steeped to make a relaxing pot of tea.

With this expansive crop known for its signature hue and scent, Rassi is hoping to inspire area gardeners to think beyond the suburban spring gardening season and to enjoy the gardening season throughout the summer and into harvest time.

*Champs de Rêves is located at 1620 Chemin Daouïst, Saint-Lazare*

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