



**Alternative Agriculture Enterprise Agritourism Success Story**

**Lavender Hill Farm  
Brings a Little Bit of France to Oklahoma**

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Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Fact Sheets  
are also available on our website at:  
<http://osufacts.okstate.edu>

**Interview with Judy Wheeler**  
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**Introduction**

Some farmers are looking at agriculture with a new perspective. Increased production costs and declining commodity markets are prompting agriculture producers to look for alternative enterprises to supplement farming income. One alternative being tested by Oklahoma producers to subsidize traditional farming operations is agritourism.

Agritourism is the intersection of agriculture and tourism. It allows farmers and ranchers to earn higher profits by replacing or supplementing traditional farm operations with innovative on-farm and on-ranch activities that are often attractive to visitors and tourists.

According to the Travel Industry Association of America (TIA), agritourism is one of the fastest growing segments of the travel industry. This includes visits to working farms, ranches, wineries, roadside stands, and agricultural industries.

In order to assist producers who are seeking to diversify their operations through agritourism activities, the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service (OCES) at Oklahoma State University (OSU), the Oklahoma Tourism and Recreation Department (OTRD), and the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food, and Forestry (ODAFF) have developed a cooperative agritourism program for Oklahoma. A media team, including Ron Dahlgren, OSU Agricultural Communications Services Senior Radio/Television Producer, traveled the state interviewing successful agritourism enterprises. These materials will be used for establishment and promotion of Oklahoma Agritourism.

The information below is part of an interview with Judy Wheeler, owner of Lavender Hill Farm. The farm is located in Stone Bluff, Oklahoma just a short 20-minute drive from Tulsa. Inspired by a trip to France, Wheeler planted a test garden which proved the lavender plant could survive Oklahoma winters. Visitors can participate in a "pick-your-own" lavender bouquet and visit the on-farm gift shop that stocks products made locally, as well as products from overseas. Lavender Hill Farm brings a little bit of France to Oklahoma.

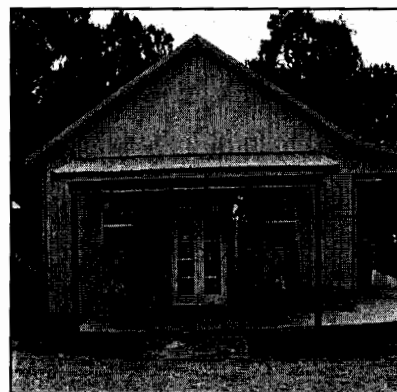


Photo courtesy of Lavender Hill Farm

*The following information is from Judy Wheeler's interview.*

**What made you decide to go into the present alternative enterprise?**

I fell in love with the lavender plant, plus it was not being grown in Oklahoma. The plant is unique and I saw it as a challenge, partly due to Oklahoma's unpredictable weather. The incredible interest in lavender with its appearance and aromatherapy caused me to want to pursue this as an agriculture enterprise.

**How did you make the transition?**

Agritourism was a familiar term to me. Several neighbors have vineyards, wineries, and soap shops. Through a cooperative effort, a plan developed to make the area into a destination trip, not a pass by. We capitalize on our strengths and refer customers to neighboring businesses.

I never thought of this as a hobby. I was previously skilled in entrepreneurship and used those skills to develop this business. The most important research was done up front.

**What is your primary target audience?**

The nature of the business allows the owner to control the growth with endless possibilities. I have an option to wholesale the lavender through catalogs. Be happy with your business and know your limitations. Ninety-nine percent of the work is done by me, with family members helping at various times. I feel the success of the business is my responsibility.

People enjoy the attractiveness of the lavender and being in the country. We stock unique items in the gift shop and keep pricing competitive. Visitors comment about the unusual plant growing in Oklahoma.

**How do you obtain financing?**

Financing was not necessary considering the initial investment was \$300. The expense is in labor. Since no pesticides or herbicides are used, control methods are done by hand. A greenhouse and shop have been added. These structures were financed with profits made from sales. The greatest investment is time. It takes a lot of hard work to be successful.

**How did you acquire information?**

I read growers' guides on lavender production. I also traveled to Sante Fe and Seattle to visit with other growers of lavender and local nurseries.

**How do you market your services?**

Initially I started by word of mouth. People began driving by to see the progress. I also exhibit at Farmers' Markets. Candles and soaps are made using the lavender and then sold in the gift shop.

The Annual Stone Bluff Lavender Festival is the centerpiece of the business. I utilize television and newspaper ads for promotion of the festival.

I place a pre-Christmas ad in a national publication. There are many free resources. Some web sites allow you to add your business to their listings. I found that Internet sales are not as important as initially thought. Boxing and shipping requires a lot of time.

*Discover Oklahoma*, a weekly television travel program filmed a special segment at the farm. Exposure from the media was very beneficial.

We offer educational opportunities by way of on-farm tours. Tour groups can visit the farm at no charge beginning May 1. Sales of plants and other gift items cover expenses.

**What went wrong, and why? How did you correct the situation?**

The hardest time is in July and August. Care of the plants can be very physically challenging. I began pruning by hand, but now use a lavender harvester; a piece of Japanese equipment used for tea harvest.

**What went right, and why? How did you build on your success?**

The business has grown at a nice pace. I enjoy being outdoors and love the beauty of nature. I also enjoy the crafting aspect and designing wreaths. It is a fun business.

The business is adaptable to my wants, needs, and desires. I can establish my own hours; however, there does need to be some consistency.

**How do you handle liability concerns?**

I established an LLC company and insure the business in chunks. A special policy is obtained for the festival. It is not as costly as some might think. I also keep first aid kits on hand.

**What would be the most important advice you would give other farmers considering an alternative enterprise?**

Find a niche that no one else is providing or something new to Oklahoma. You have to like your business and be enthusiastic. I would enter into the lavender business again in a heartbeat. The most important advice is to do your homework. Make your business a destination point where people want to come and enjoy your products or services.

**Where do you plan to go from here?**

I'm not sure. The business is closed three months during the winter. Creatively, there will be something new. Participating at herb shows and Farmers' Markets minimizes advertising budgets and still gets products to the public.

**Are you willing to share your information?**

Yes.

*This concludes the interview and information provided by Ms. Wheeler.*

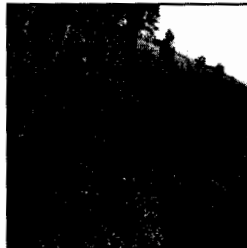
**Benefits of Agritourism**

The transition to alternative enterprises is happening at a favorable time. People from both urban and rural communities are seeking entertainment and recreation from local farmers and ranchers who support the conservation of natural resources. Children and adults want opportunities to engage in interactive, educational outdoor activities plus tourists interested in farm culture and heritage want to better understand agriculture.

Increased income for farm families and added visitor attraction sites for communities are two major benefits of agritourism. A farm and its natural resources provide great opportunities for alternative enterprises through agritourism and is a viable option for community economic development.

Tourism brings non-local dollars into the community to be spent at gift shops, restaurants, motels, gas stations, and convenience stores. This translates into profits, salaries, and tax revenues for local economies.

Promoting agritourism is smart for the whole community. It encourages communities to support good infrastructure, creates positive attitudes towards visitors, inspires clean environments, combines a good retail mix, increases local tourism organizations, focuses on coordination of activities, and promotes good hospitality.



The Oklahoma Agritourism Steering Committee, an interagency between Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food, and Forestry, Oklahoma Department of Tourism and Recreation, and the Department of Wildlife Conservation points out that agritourism combines two of the state's top industries: agriculture (\$7 billion annually) and tourism (\$4.5 billion annually). By combining the two industries, the potential for growth is phenomenal.

According to a study by the TIA of America, nearly two-thirds of all U.S. adults, or 87 million individuals, have taken a trip to a rural destination within the past three years.

Travel and tourism is a \$4.5 billion industry in Oklahoma that generates more than 70,700 jobs, according to OTRD. It also generates nearly \$760.4 million in tax revenue for federal, state, and local governments.

It is easy to understand why the combination of agriculture and tourism, with its focus on rural and economic development, has begun to pique the interest of many Oklahoma producers. For many farming operations, making profits depends on diversifying operations which include services and products designed for tourists.

### Assistance Available for Agritourism

To encourage rural and economic development, the ODAFF implemented the Oklahoma Agriculture Enhancement and Diversification Program. This is designed to develop or improve uses for agriculture products, expand the state's production of value-added products, and encourage diversified farming. This program has been tremendously successful at helping producers throughout rural Oklahoma increase income and create jobs in their communities. In addition to diversifying

Oklahoma's agriculture industry, the program has been used for producers who want to enter the agritourism business.

The Oklahoma State Legislature also recognized the need to assist with rural diversification. House Bill 1680, effective January 1, 2006, was designed to spur investments and create new farming operations in rural Oklahoma. It increases the maximum amount of tax credit for investment in certain agricultural cooperatives and helps landowners with the costs of starting agritourism ventures.

Several government agencies have joined forces to help landowners assess their natural resources and provide information to farmers and ranchers identifying alternative agricultural enterprises and agritourism opportunities.

ODAFF established a special Agritourism Division to help agriculture producers identify opportunities in agritourism. Information on business plan development, marketing options, tourism expansion, and resource assessment is available in the Oklahoma Agritourism Resource Manual listed on their website.

Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension Service specialists assist potential entrepreneurs and rural communities considering the agritourism industry. Professionals in each county provide educational programs, strategic planning, and information on economic diversification. Check the list below for a resource near you.

Sources: Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food, and Forestry, Oklahoma Tourism and Recreation Department, U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service, Travel Industry Association of America.

**Table 1. Resource List.**

<i>Name</i>	<i>Contact</i>	<i>Phone</i>	<i>Web Site</i>
OK Agritourism/ODAFF	Abby Cash	(405) 522-5652	<a href="http://www.oklahomaagritourism.com">www.oklahomaagritourism.com</a>
OSU/OCES	County Extension Directors		<a href="http://countyext.okstate.edu/">http://countyext.okstate.edu/</a>
OSU/Rural Development	Mike Woods Stan Ralstin Jack Frye	(405) 744-9837 (580) 237-7677 (580) 332-4100	<a href="http://www.rd.okstate.edu">www.rd.okstate.edu</a>
OTRD	Barbie Elder	(405) 230-8409	<a href="http://www.oklatourism.gov">www.oklatourism.gov</a>

## **The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service**

### ***Bringing the University to You!***

The Cooperative Extension Service is the largest, most successful informal educational organization in the world. It is a nationwide system funded and guided by a partnership of federal, state, and local governments that delivers information to help people help themselves through the land-grant university system.

Extension carries out programs in the broad categories of agriculture, natural resources and environment; family and consumer sciences; 4-H and other youth; and community resource development. Extension staff members live and work among the people they serve to help stimulate and educate Americans to plan ahead and cope with their problems.

Some characteristics of the Cooperative Extension system are:

- The federal, state, and local governments cooperatively share in its financial support and program direction.
- It is administered by the land-grant university as designated by the state legislature through an Extension director.
- Extension programs are nonpolitical, objective, and research-based information.
- It provides practical, problem-oriented education for people of all ages. It is designated to take the knowledge of the university to those persons who do not or cannot participate in the formal classroom instruction of the university.
- It utilizes research from university, government, and other sources to help people make their own decisions.
- More than a million volunteers help multiply the impact of the Extension professional staff.
- It dispenses no funds to the public.
- It is not a regulatory agency, but it does inform people of regulations and of their options in meeting them.
- Local programs are developed and carried out in full recognition of national problems and goals.
- The Extension staff educates people through personal contacts, meetings, demonstrations, and the mass media.
- Extension has the built-in flexibility to adjust its programs and subject matter to meet new needs. Activities shift from year to year as citizen groups and Extension workers close to the problems advise changes.

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