



Derek and Gill enjoy a new life on their Greek-island farm.

Living the Lavender Lifestyle

By Heidi Fuller-Love

Parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme do well in Crete's sweltering climate, but if '70s songsters Simon & Garfunkel came to chill on Greece's largest island, they'd probably have an urge to add lavender to their list.

"The local people are fascinated—they see us as Martians. No one grows lavender here and yet it's ideally suited to the climate—and it smells absolutely heavenly," says expat Gill Leonard.

Not that creating an organic lavender farm was high on Gill's list of priorities when she and her partner, Derek Pearce, gave up a champagne lifestyle as successful IT consultants in London and moved to northwest Crete six years ago.

For Derek, 62, the major attraction was a laidback lifestyle. "People here let you be who you are and do what you like. They're never happier than when they see you happy," he says, adding, "Our other options were Ireland or Sri Lanka, but when I was diagnosed with early-onset osteo-arthritis we went for Crete because it has a dry climate, which is much better for me."

Gill, 54, was seduced by the chance to get back in touch with nature. "In London I knew nothing about gardening. Here I enjoy getting my hands dirty."

To ensure they were making the right move, the couple rented for several years before buying their 15-year-old house in 2006. It cost them \$284,000 and has two spacious bedrooms, a large, open-plan kitchen-living room, two large terraces, and four acres of land.

Seeking a use for that acreage, Gill was inspired to grow lavender, a crop native to the Mediterranean, after reading Virginia McNaughton's authoritative tome *Lavender: The Grower's Guide*.

"I've found a niche here, which means I'm not treading on anyone's toes. And as a lavender farmer sharing my experiences with local olive farmers, I've also found a unique way to engage and

exchange with the local community," she explains.

Camporated oils made from this fragrant herb have been used on the island for medicinal purposes since Minoan times. Still, local officials were skeptical about the project, *The Lavender Way* (see: TheLavenderWay.com), and at first refused to register the couple as farmers.

"You have to show them that you won't take 'no' for an answer," Derek says. "There's a lot of red tape here on Crete when you want to start a business, but if you're passionate about something, the Cretans will end up helping you."

Using techniques developed by Masanobu Fukuoka, the Japanese soil scientist who pioneered organic farming in the 1940s, Gill and Derek cultivate their crops in circles to protect them from fierce summer sun and autumn winds. Last year they harvested 110 pounds of lavender to produce approximately half a gallon of oil. This was used to produce a range of balms, salves, perfumes, and topical applications, which were snapped up by local shops and members of the expat community.

"We're starting small but plan to plant more lavender and extend our range to other plants each year," Gill explains.

The couple's farm is in Apokoronas, a sub-region of the Chania Province. Watered by the Kiliaris River, this is one of the greenest regions of Crete and ideal for farming. Tomatoes, avocados, and exotic flowers grown here are flown out to markets all over Greece. Warm winters and relatively cool summers also make it a favored spot for foreigners seeking property on the island.

Their house is a stone's throw from Kournas, Crete's only freshwater lake, and a short drive from the popular resort of Georgiopolis, with its long, sandy beaches and tavernas serving home-cooked food. "We never go far from home during harvest time. But we do sometimes make a trip to Polychromata, our favorite taverna, where they offer a wide range of local cuisine, including one of the best *horta* (wild herbs) salads with garlic and tomatoes I've ever tasted," says Derek.

"People let you be who you are and do what you like."

People want to live in northwest Crete because there are no signs of over-development, and it is likely to stay that way because there are strict planning regulations in place. "There is quite a large expat community in this area," Gill says. "They love the west because it is so green and fertile."

Affected by the current recession, property prices have fallen by as much as 30% over the past couple of years. But apart from that, Crete has remained relatively unaffected by the economic crisis rocking the rest of the country.

"Crete is a world away from all those problems, and it's peaceful here," says Derek. "Living here is pretty good value, too, especially if you grow your own, or buy local produce." A kilo—over two pounds—of tomatoes costs less than \$1.25, he says; you can buy excellent-quality olive oil for \$3.75 to \$5 a liter; local wine is inexpensive, especially if you buy from the local wineries; and a good meal for two is only about \$30.

Shaded by centuries-old plane trees and fringed by olive groves, the nearby mountain villages of Gavalohori and Kokkino Chorio are where the 1964 classic movie *Zorba the Greek* was filmed.

"It's paradise on earth here—maybe that's why our lavender grows so well," Derek laughs. ■