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Fields of lavender at Tantivy Farm

WHERE THE LAVENDER GROWS

At Tantivy Farm, first it was horses, then it was herbs.

By HEATHER BIEN | Photography by LYNDIA RICHARDSON

PENNY ROSS GOT OFF A PLANE IN Maryland in 1975. Fresh out of a small town in Maine, she was set on a life focused on horses. She'd enrolled as a working student at the Potomac Horse Center, and on her first day, she cut through a barn on the way to the cafeteria. She remembers the moment vividly.

"There was a man walking on the upper level of the barn. White britches, black boots, English riding cap, tapping his riding whip," Penny recalls. "He was followed closely by an Australian shepherd. I became madly infatuated with that Englishman with the brilliant blue eyes."

She was a student, and he was an instructor, a few years older. Rather than becoming a romantic interest, Penny was stuck spit-polishing bridles and mucking out stalls.

Brian Ross, the Englishman, did notice Penny's bond with that shepherd dog, and at the end of the program, he said, "Poco loves you. Why don't you take her?"

She did. Penny moved back to New England and cared for Poco for several years, staying in touch with Brian only to update him on his former pet. But as all dogs do, Poco passed away—and in his passing, opened a door: Brian mentioned he'd be in Boston and suggested stopping by.

They married a year later.

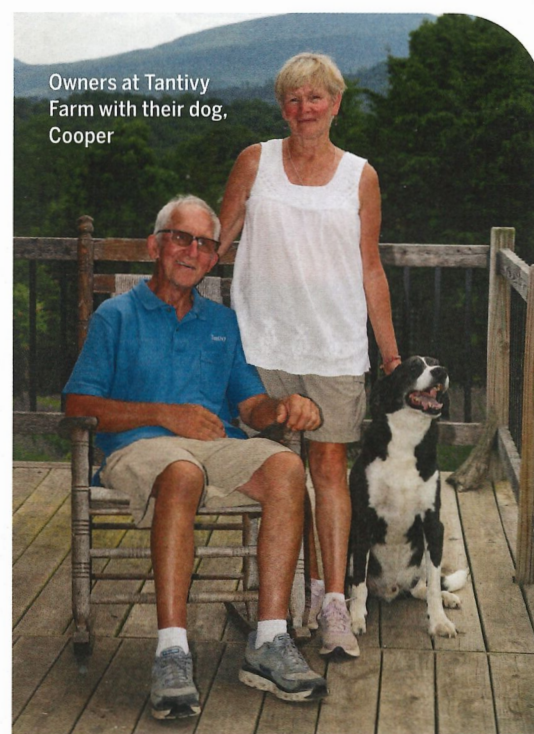
Penny and Brian realized there might be an opportunity in those breathtaking fields of purple herbs.

Following the Horses

For decades, the couple built big careers in the horse world, eventually buying a farm in Rock-bridge County. Brian traveled the globe judging world-class dressage and eventing competitions. Penny raised their two boys at the place they named Tantivy Farm—after Brian's family sweet shop in England—while organizing as many as

25 horse shows a year. They were doing what they loved, and burning out in the process. Soon, it was time for something different.

They explored how to justify staying on their 54-acre property by looking to the land itself. Inspired by a 2016 visit to lavender farms in the



Owners at Tantivy Farm with their dog, Cooper

Pacific Northwest, they had over 350 lavender plants shipped in from Washington State. There was no business plan—just searching for a bit of joy in retirement and a reason to stay on the farm.

Learning From the Lavender

That first year, they learned from other lavender growers, trading knowledge and experience. They planted English and French varieties on the rocky hillside, letting them thrive in the dry, poor soil. With each harvest, they experimented with new uses—culinary touches like pepper and chocolate, plus shampoo, lotion, and healing salve. They took their wares to the Staunton Farmers Market, and a customer base quickly developed.

As Penny recalls, "People would ask us, 'Where's your farm? Can we come see the lavender?' and we thought, 'No, that's our home!'"

But the questions continued, and Penny and Brian realized there might be an opportunity in those breathtaking fields of purple herbs. In 2018, they built a gift shop, followed by porches and more lavender the next year. People began to trickle in. Then in 2020, with fresh air and open spaces at a premium, visitors showed up in droves. With mountains, flower gardens, and lavender as far as the eye can see, the setting is nothing short of magical.

More visitors pour in each year, ready to stroll the fields and sit for a minute with lavender ice cream. Tantivy Farm's offerings have grown accordingly, with workshops from local makers on growing lavender, teacup gardening, and lavender wreaths. Their mail-order business thrives too, with customers near and far restocking their simple syrup or salve as soon as it runs out.

It's been 10 years now, and the lavender has taken on a life of its own. For Penny and Brian, these herbs have become more than a respite from the horses—with each visitor in awe of the surroundings, each sip of lavender lemonade, this has become their way to share their land with the community. TantivyFarm.com

Heather Bien covers home, style, travel, and culture for Garden & Gun, Southern Living, Washingtonian, and more. Visit her blog, *C'est Bien*, at HeatherBien.com.