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**MIKE TEEPLE** of Red Rock Farms loads lavender plants at St. Johns Industrial Air Park, Arizona (left). Red Rock Lavender Farm, near Concho, Arizona (above).

## PRECIOUS CARGO

### LAVENDER BY AIR

**W**hat makes something precious? The price tag? Or perhaps that someone you love desires it? We recently suffered a traumatic horticultural loss—one of Jean’s treasured Provence lavender plants. She bought them several years ago at the annual Red Rock Farms Lavender Festival outside tiny Concho, Arizona. (See “Scent of the Sky,” June 2010 *Flight Training*.)

Under Jean’s careful tending, the aromatic plants have since flourished in our front yard, from four-inch seedlings to glorious, three-foot purple-blossomed bushes. Appealing as lavender may be to humans, it’s unappetizing to elk, rabbits, and *javelina*. So we never anticipated losing one to a gopher dining from underneath. I asked Jean if she planned to replace it.

“I’d like to,” she said, “but it’s challenging finding hardy lavender locally. The last bushes I planted didn’t last.”

“So the Concho plants are hardier?”

“Yeah, they seem better suited to our climate. But although Red Rock offers other lavender products online, they only sell plants during their annual festival that ended last month.” I offered to inquire about flying over to get some.

“No,” she said. “It seems impractical flying almost to New Mexico to buy a few

plants.” That ended the discussion for a few days—until I next encountered Jean pondering the remains of her beloved lavender bush.

“I wonder if I can bring it back to life,” she said, but that didn’t look promising.

Admitting it might not make sense flying halfway across the state to buy three or four plants, I asked if other gardeners in her club might want some. That apparently passed the test, so I phoned Red Rock Farms owner Mike Teeple.

“Given Concho’s small size, you must surely drive to Show Low or St. Johns for supplies,” I said. “Could I coordinate buying some lavender plants when you’re running errands?”

“I visit both those towns several times a week,” said Mike. “Either airport would be convenient.” With that, Jean quickly found takers to share a flat of 18 plants.

Mike and I first agreed to meet in Show Low, which is closer to Flagstaff. But then I thought to photograph Mike’s lavender fields en route in hopes of capturing the vivid blooms from aloft. At just 13 miles beyond the farm, St. Johns suddenly made better sense for our rendezvous.

I knew the farm’s general location but wasn’t sure about spotting it from the air. I asked Mike to send a smartphone photo, but unfortunately it lacked GPS coordinates. So I decided to navigate directly to Concho, located at a prominent highway intersection, and search from there.

Sparkling showers framed my route from forested Flagstaff over canyon-gashed high desert south of Holbrook, to eastern Arizona’s lush grasslands. I found the farm easily enough along Highway 180A north of Concho, but light rain muted the lavender fields. Oh well, I’d try again on my way back.

“Fill it to the brim,” advised a Bonanza pilot when I taxied up to the pump at St. Johns Industrial Air Park. “You won’t find cheaper avgas anywhere else!” I explained that as much as I’d like to, I dared not return to 7,000-foot-elevation Flagstaff with topped tanks, or due to density-altitude concerns my airplane might not leave the ground again until fall.

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St. Johns is one of the increasingly rare small airports that still offer full-service fuel. Airport manager Gary Liston had just serviced the *Flying Carpet* when Mike Teeple arrived in his pickup truck.

Mike and his wife, Christine, originally moved to eastern Arizona to build vacation-home developments. They planted decorative lavender as part of their first project, and when it flourished they cultivated more. To their surprise, the area's high grasslands proved to be among the best places in the world to grow lavender, and the rest is history. With the farm firmly established, they're now adding a vineyard.

The lavender business takes Mike all over the country. So when he mentioned his dad flew Air Force B-52s, I asked if he'd considered becoming a pilot himself to ease travel from remote Concho. (It's a four-hour drive to the nearest cities of Phoenix or Albuquerque.)

"I did in the past," he replied. "When a bunch of my friends became pilots, I should have joined them. But I missed the opportunity." Hopefully he'll reconsider.

Launching homeward I again circled the ranch, seeking the sheen of shimmering lavender from the air. But despite newly arrived sunshine, harvesting was apparently complete and the only splash of color was a single vivid bush beckoning from the farmyard.

No matter, the glow on Jean's face when I returned home was brighter than any blossoms. What's more, her fellow gardeners seemed as excited about the exotic aerial transport as the plants themselves. I soon found myself texting lavender-entering-the-baggage-compartment and lavender-farm-from-the-air photos to half the gardening club.

My one error was underestimating the power of these aromatic plants. Hardly had I delivered my precious cargo when Jean began receiving "Do you have more seedlings?" requests. The next time I visit Mike, I'll fill the *Flying Carpet* to brimming with fragrant, colorful lavender. 🍷

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**Greg Brown** is an aviation author, photographer, and former National Flight Instructor of the Year

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