

Excursion report–Plateau de Valensole 2008-09-08

The Plateau de Valensole is the bread basket of the region and delivered for more than 700 years products like nuts, fruits, vegetables, truffles and lavender to the coast. It is located at 500 m above sea level and the soil is an agglomerate of stones and very porous. Climatic conditions are characterised by high temperatures a very view precipitation.

Between 1850 and 1970 there was an exodus of the rural areas. Near the plateau 30 villages became abandoned, similarly the terraces with olive trees. The state accelerated the migration into cities by buying the land from the farmers.

In the late 19th century wild lavender *Lavandula angustifolia* (French “fina“) was gathered in the mountains and sold to the perfume industry. It grows best under dry conditions at about 1000 m above sea level. Despite it was not the main crop, it revitalised the country by an additional source of income in times of the migration into cities. Between 1920 and 1930 farmers started planting lavender, but it was still not so important.

In the beginning of the 20th century hybrid lavender was grown. This *Lavandula hybrida* (French and German “Lavandin“) is a hybridisation between *L. angustifolia* and *L. latifolia*. It is very resistant to drought but contains less oil than the natural lavender. For about 100 years it is grown at the plateau and mainly sold to the washing powder industry.

The cultivation of lavender is highly mechanised, and the plants do not need much care. The work can be done by the farmers and their families themselves. From the third year after planting, lavender can be harvested until the 10th to 12th year.

“Real” lavender is much more expensive. For purified oil of the hybrid lavender farmers get about 20 € per litre, “fina” is about 70 €, and if it is sold by the producers themselves they earn up to 250 € per litre. Chemicals are applied once a year against insects. Currently there is a big problem with a pest (from bacteria).

At any time of the short history of the agricultural usage of lavender buyers controlled the price and the selling farmers strongly depended on the perfume industry. Due to the quickly changing market prices, farmers have to change immediately their crops. Wheat is grown as a security with a low but fixed price due to subsidies by the EU. Growing lavender is more risky but necessary to earn enough money. Besides the changing prices weather events like droughts and floods also threaten the crop. Thus, farmers have to maximise their income by balancing risk and security. Most of the farmers grow beside the lavender sheep and goat for cheese production, some also grow sage (*Salvia spec.*) or other perfume plants.

About eight years ago a quality standard for lavender was set up by the EU. Because Ukraine and China (the main competitors in the lavender business) are not able to keep this high-quality standard, it is good for French farmers by stabilising the prices.

Besides lavender farmers grow on areas of 100 to 250 ha almond trees and grape, but less than in former times. Another crop is truffle growing under oak trees, mainly harvested by using pigs. Attempts to grow corn failed because of drought. Also the irrigation of fruit trees turned out to be too expensive, after an irrigation system was built by private and public investors.

During a few weeks in spring and autumn sheep are grazing on the plateau, but mainly in the eastern more mountains. Afterward they move on (transhumans). The number of sheep remained constant since 1850, and the land for grazing is mostly common.

In the early 20th century a huge amount of Black Pines *Pinus nigra* instead of the indigenous Scotch pine *Pinus sylvestris* was planted by foresters to avoid soil erosion, but the wood turned out to be worthless for furniture. Nowadays it is recommended to reopen at least the top of the hills but the state has no money to do this. Since a heavy storm in 1999 the local paper factory has had enough wood for ten years but there is no planning for a long-term usage of the wood.

For the local people planting trees is a trauma, mostly due to historically grown aesthetical values.

Excursion report from Peter Meffert