

Lithuania's blue blooms gone as flax farming ends

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Tourists strolling the streets of Lithuania's capital Vilnius will immediately notice the word "linas", the Lithuanian word for linseed or flax, posted in large letters above shop windows.

The traditional plant has also inspired a very popular first name -- Linas for men, Lina for women.

But despite being celebrated in Lithuanian folklore, pale blue linseed flowers no longer carpet meadows from spring through to early summer.

Now, fibres produced from the [plants](#) to make Lithuania's popular linen cloth must be imported, mainly from France, Italy and Belarus.

Local farmers did not plant a single hectare of flax in 2010 to be used for textile production -- a strong sector for business in the Baltic state of 3.5 million people.

Looking back with nostalgia at a time when linseed was in full bloom across 21,500 hectares some 20 years ago, local farmers and producers point a finger at the European Union as the [culprit](#) behind the decline.

"Subsidies have now fallen to 675 litas (195 euros, \$257) per hectare," says Beruta Vasiliauskiene, head of Jubarko Linu Verslas, one of the last farms to have grown flax in recent years.

But the 50 hectares once sown with linseed have gradually been replaced and the farm will not plant a single seed this year.

Before the Baltic state joined the EU in 2004, public aid was almost three times higher.

"Nobody grows flax any longer, it's no longer profitable," said Vasiliauskiene.

The only exception is the Upyte farm research centre in central Lithuania, whose staff plant linseed every year simply to keep it alive.

"Lithuanian flax might disappear completely if we stopped our activities," says Zofija Jankauskiene from the centre. "Every year, we plant 300-500 different seeds to preserve the plant."

Still, the production of linen cloth in Lithuania keeps booming.

Linas, the country's oldest factory producing flax-fibre textiles, celebrates its 55th anniversary this year.

Last year, the plant, based in Panevezys in northern Lithuania, turned out 2.5 million metres of fabric, but it has relied on imports from neighbouring Belarus for the past three years.

"We used to have a facility for turning flax into linen fibres, but in the end it has turned out more profitable to import fibres on spools, says Jurgita Senulyte, a designer at Linas.

"Growing and processing flax used to be a traditional activity," says Vidas Vaitkus, head of a company producing linens and other products from flax since 2002.

Following the example of local rivals, his company sells linen cloth products to France, Italy or Japan.

"At every fair we attend, we have to answer people asking if the product was woven or sown in Lithuania," said Vaitkus. "Made in Lithuania remains a mark of quality."

But foreigners are typically the only group charmed by Lithuanian linen -- less than five percent of Linas's output stays in the country, where it is sold largely to tourists.

"Linen has become too expensive for Lithuanians," says Jurgita Senulyte.

Raw material prices are growing but the relatively low cost of labour still makes Lithuanian linen competitive on foreign markets, she added.

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