



a love affair with
Lavender

Revered by ancient herbalists and cooks, lavender is a delightful addition to modern gardens and kitchens.

BY BARBARA PERRY LAWTON

THERE IS something magical about lavender (*Lavandula* spp.). Perhaps it's the fragrance that has permeated so many parts of our lives over the centuries. Perhaps it's the year-round appeal of the tidy gray-green foliage. Perhaps it's the bees, butterflies, and other beneficial insects the flowers attract to the garden. Perhaps it's the herb's long history of association with humankind (see sidebar on page 21). Or maybe it's the combination of all these factors. All I know is that I can't get enough of lavender in my garden and in my home.

GENUS OVERVIEW

Depending on which taxonomist you consult, there are between 20 and 40 species of lavender in the genus *Lavandula*. The plants hybridize readily with each other, however, and the nomenclature, as you will read a little later, is a bit of a minefield. Native to the Mediterranean region through to some Atlantic islands, northern Africa, western Asia, and India, the genus consists of small evergreen (or evergray, to be more precise) shrubs or shrublike perennials bearing foliage and flowers that are singularly fragrant.

As members of the mint family (Lamiaceae), lavender has paired leaves that are equal and opposite, as well as the square stems characteristic of the family. Lavender leaves may be simple and entire or dentate (toothed) to dissected or pinnate. The two-lipped flowers appear in summer on whorled spikes that rise above the foliage on terminal growth. Flowers come in shades of blue, lavender, purple, pink, or white. Lavender oil, often used in commercial products, is produced in the great-

Lavender grows in multi-colored waves at Cedarbrook Lavender and Herb Farm in Sequim, Washington.

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est quantities beginning when the flowers are about half open and continuing into the late stages of bloom.

SPECIES AND SELECTIONS

A number of lavenders are quite hardy, growing in USDA Hardiness Zones 5 to 9; other tender species are cultivated primarily as annuals in cold-winter regions. As a genus, lavender is quite heat and drought tolerant; many species thrive in hot, dry regions such as Texas and central California.

English lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*) is far and away the most commonly grown species in American gardens. There are many cultivars of English lavender, generally distinguished by height (anywhere from eight inches to two feet tall) and flower colors, which range from white to pink, dark violet, and blue. Most cultivars are hardy in USDA Zones 6 to 9.

Robert Kourik of Occidental, California, likes the English lavender 'Silver Frost'. "The glorious powder-white foliage adds a lovely accent to the garden all year," he says. "Another one that I like on account of its deep-cobalt flower is 'Betty's Blue', which does best in Zones 8 and higher." Kourik, author of *The Lavender Garden* (see "Resources," page 20), notes that the latter selection is "a bit fussy about well-draining soil and so needs more attention than other English lavenders."

'Hidcote', another well-known English lavender, is a favorite of June Hutson, horticulturist at the Kemper Home Demonstration Gardens of the Missouri Botanical Garden in St. Louis, Missouri. "It seems to thrive in our midwestern climate when others go on to greener pastures," she says, "and combines well with other plants that want minimum irrigation in the summer."

"I'm fond of 'Sharon Roberts'," says Rose Marie Nichols-McGee of Nichols Garden Nursery in Albany, Oregon. This English lavender cultivar is hardy to USDA Zone 5 and has dark violet flowers. "Give this selection a light shearing in midsummer and it will soon send up new flower spikes followed by a stunning fall flower display," says Nichols-McGee.

Botanical confusion reigns over the identity of another popular lavender, usually sold as *L. xheterophylla* (commonly called sweet lavender). This hybrid of



'Hidcote' is a popular low-growing English lavender cultivar with dark violet flowers.

French lavender (*L. dentata*) and English lavender originated in southern France. However, plants sold with this name are more likely to be fringed lavender (*L. xalardii*), which is a hybrid of French lavender and spike lavender (*L. latifolia*). Regardless of the name, the plant is hardy to USDA Zone 8 and very tolerant of heat and humidity, so it makes a good choice

for gardeners in the American Southeast and South. The fragrance leans more toward camphor and eucalyptus, so it is not as useful for herbal and culinary purposes.

The lavandins (*L. xintermedia*), also known as hedge lavender, are sterile hybrids of English lavender and spike lavender that are noted for their pleasant fragrance and vigorous, shrubby growth



Heat- and humidity-tolerant fringed lavender is a good choice in warmer regions.



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habit. Larger (growing two to four feet tall) and more heat tolerant than English lavender, the lavandins produce more essential oil per plant than other lavenders and are thus the source of most commercial lavender oil. Most selections, with the exception of 'Edelweiss', have pale purple flowers.

Personally, I am especially fond of 'Grosso' (sometimes listed as 'Fat Spike'), a lavandin selection hardy in Zones 5 to 10. It has good gray year-round foliage and long-stemmed flower spikes that are excellent for craft projects. Even in the demanding climate of St. Louis, Missouri, where I live, the frigid weather, droughts,

Northwest. Since it's reliably hardy only to USDA Zone 8, gardeners in the East and Midwest are better served by treating it as a summer annual. The flowers are composed of conelike spikes of dark purple flowers, topped by a jaunty plume of contrastingly colored petallike bracts. These odd-looking sterile bracts have given rise to common names such as rabbit ear or papillon (butterfly) lavender.

Popular varieties include 'Otto Quast' with deep purple flowers surmounted by paler bracts; 'Papillon' (sometimes listed as *L. stoechas* ssp. *pedunculata*) with green to reddish-purple bracts topping deeper pur-

lavender makes terrific low hedges, but a drawback is that if individual plants are damaged by dogs or stray soccer balls, it creates a gap for a year or two until new plants can fill in. "If you are installing a hedge of lavender, buy two or three extra plants and place them in the back of the garden somewhere," suggests Ellen Spector Platt, who runs Meadowlark Flower & Herb Farm in Orwigsburg, Pennsylvania. "They'll grow at about the same rate as your hedge plants, so you can use them to fill holes in the hedge."

Lavender and roses are traditionally considered companions, and they serve



Opposite: 'Grosso' is a hardy, resilient lavandin selection with pale violet flowers. Above: Spanish lavender, shown in a container, left, and growing with Jerusalem sage (*Phlomis* sp.) in a garden bed, right, is not reliably hardy north of USDA Zone 8.

and other vagaries don't faze it a bit.

An individual selection worth mentioning is 'Goodwin Creek Grey', a hybrid of woolly lavender (*L. lanata*) and French lavender introduced by Goodwin Creek Gardens in Oregon. It grows to about three feet tall and broad, with dense, silvery foliage and deep bluish purple flowers. It is tolerant of heat and humidity, but hardy only to about USDA Zone 8.

Spanish lavender (*L. stoechas*), sometimes referred to as French or Italian lavender because it grows wild in those countries, can be grown year-round in Texas, California, and parts of the Pacific

ple flowers; and 'Kew Red', which has pink bracts atop maroon flowers.

LAVENDERS IN THE LANDSCAPE

Lavender doesn't need to be confined to a kitchen or herb garden—it is wonderful in the ornamental garden, where savvy gardeners are using it to edge formal beds, in mixed gardens, along drives and walkways, and in containers that can bring handsome definition to patios and terraces. And it is a must-have plant for the butterfly or wildlife garden, attracting bees, butterflies, and other pollinators. An additional virtue is that lavender is deer resistant.

each other well when combined in beds or borders. The soft gray-greens and tidiness of lavender foliage can serve as transitions between ornamentals that would otherwise clash in colors or textures. In garden and landscape settings, the aromatic character of lavender's foliage is an additional asset, releasing its heady fragrance as visitors brush past it.

Lavender is easy to shape by pruning into formal or informal shapes. In cold-winter regions, containerized plants should be protected from damaging freeze-thaw cycles either by storing them in an unheated porch or garage or by

Resources

The Encyclopedia of Herbs by Arthur O Tucker and Thomas DeBaggio. Timber Press, Portland, Oregon, 2009.

The Genus *Lavandula* by Tim Upson and Susyn Andrews. Timber Press, Portland, Oregon, 2004.

Lavender by Ellen Spector Platt. Stackpole Books, Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, 1999.

The Lavender Garden by Robert Kourik. Chronicle Books, San Francisco, California, 1998.

Lavender: The Grower's Guide by Virginia McNaughton and Joan L. Headley. Timber Press, Portland, Oregon, 2000.

For links to 2010 lavender festivals, click on the web special linked to this article on the AHS website.

Sources

Mountain Valley Growers, Dunlap, CA. (559) 338-2775.

www.mountainvalleygrowers.com.

Nichols Garden Nursery, Albany, OR. (541) 928-9280.

www.nicholsgardennursery.com.

Ornamental Edibles, San Jose, CA. (408) 528-7333.

www.ornamentaledibles.com.

Park Seed Company, Greenwood, SC. (800) 213-9976.

www.parkseed.com.

Shepherd's Garden Seeds, Felton, CA. (888) 880-7228.

www.reneesgarden.com.



Roses and lavender pair well because of their complementary colors, textures, and fragrance.

wrapping them with insulating materials such as straw and burlap.

CULINARY AND HERBAL USES

Lavender is a marvelous culinary herb but is so strongly flavored that only tiny amounts should be used or you will end up with a dish that smells and tastes like perfume. "If it's flavor you want, select one of the cultivars of English lavender, which has the sweetest taste without the bitter hints of camphor present in other varieties," says Ellen Spector Platt.

Try lavender as a substitute for rosemary in any dish. It's also a good addition to sauces, soups, and stews. Add lavender

leaves or flowers to sugar in a jar and seal it up for a week or so, then use the flavored sugar in recipes for cakes and cookies. You can also use candied lavender as a garnish on baked goods.

In my opinion, lavender is the best of all the edible flowers. The combination of the aroma and color adds zest and a highly decorative effect to light summer fare such as garden salads and potato salads.

Medicinally, lavender has traditionally been used in creams and lotions to soothe and reduce tension and stress. Pillows filled with lavender flowers encourage sleep and relaxation. Infusions of lavender calm the itch of insect bites and soothe ir-

ritated skin. Used in perfumes and soaps since ancient times, lavender is still a common component of these products and in many others, including air fresheners and after-shave lotions.

For centuries, lavender has been used in potpourris and sachets placed around homes to repel insects. For this reason, you will also often find lavender listed as a component of natural-product-based insect repellents. If you rub lavender foliage between your hands and then wipe the residue on exposed body parts, it will repel mosquitoes and gnats. Test it on a small area of skin first to ensure this doesn't cause an allergic reaction.

HISTORY AND LORE OF LAVENDER

The history and lore of the genus *Lavandula* have been entwined with humankind for thousands of years. The ancient Egyptians used essential oils of lavender to help mummify their honored dead. The Phoenicians and other ancient people of Middle Eastern regions used lavender for bathing and making their homes smell fresher, as well as for cooking.

Both the English and Latin names for lavender are believed to derive from the Latin word *lavare*, meaning “to wash,” although in their book *The Encyclopedia of Herbs*, authors Arthur O. Tucker and Thomas DeBaggio argue that the name relates to the Latin *livare*, “to be livid or bluish.” Roman soldiers—who knew of the herb because it grew wild in the Mediterranean region—mixed lavender into their bath water. Not only did lavender give a fresh yet pungent fragrance to the water, it also had a repellent effect on vermin such as lice, bedbugs, and fleas that often accompanied armies.

Many historians believe that Romans brought lavender to the British Isles during the Roman occupation. Once there, lavender soon became associated with soaps, laundry washing, baths, perfumes, sachets, and potpourris—all the ways of making day-to-day life cleaner and more fragrant. To this day, lavender is used for these purposes and, in addition, is a wonderful culinary and garden herb. —B.P.L.

GROWING LAVENDER

The keys to growing lavender successfully are good drainage and full sun. A sandy or gravelly loam soil is the best choice for lavender; avoid planting it in heavy clay, which tends to retain too much water. The ideal soil pH is neutral (7) to slightly alkaline. Lavender’s essential oils, which are the source of the plant’s significant fragrance and flavor, are produced in far less quantity when the soil is overly rich, so fertilize lavender sparingly or not at all. Although lavender is drought tolerant once established, if rain is sparse over a long period, it will look better if given supplemental water from time to time.

In humid regions, grow lavender in raised beds and leave plenty of room between plants for air circulation. “A mulch of white sand, granite dust or chicken grit make a great reflective mulch to help keep away fungal diseases,” says Susan Belsinger, an herb expert, author, and blogger who lives in Brookeville, Maryland.

Grow the more tender lavenders, such as Spanish lavender (*L. stoechas*), in containers so they can be moved indoors during cold spells. In order to thrive over a long period indoors, lavender should be placed in a relatively cool room under grow lights, or in a sunny south-facing window.

If grown in full sun and a free-drain-

ing soil, lavender will have few pest and disease problems. Rare infestations by pests such as mealybugs, whiteflies, scale, or spider mites are likely an indication the plants are under stress because of unsuitable growing conditions.

Lavender will self-sow and can be grown from seeds, but to ensure you are getting true-to-type plants, experts recommend propagation by softwood or semi-hardwood cuttings made in the late spring to early summer.

HARVESTING LAVENDER

Leaves, stems, flowers, and buds are all valuable for different purposes. Harvest flower spikes for culinary, household, or craft use when the buds are just starting to open. Harvest when the morning dew on the foliage has dried. Tie small bunches together and hang them upside down in a warm, dry, dark place. The flower spikes will usually dry within a week.

If you want to use lavender as a cut flower, cut the spikes early in the morning even if they are dewy. Strip off some of the bottom leaves and put the stems into water that includes a commercial flower preservative. If cut just as the buds begin to open, a lavender arrangement will last as long or longer than other cut flowers.

Growing lavender is easy no matter where you live. And once you have tried it, you’ll find innumerable ways to enjoy the flowers, foliage, and fragrance that have captivated humans for millennia. 🌿

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“White Dwarf”, a compact English lavender cultivar, shows to good effect in this raised bed.