



Lavender is Lovely

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Well suited to both the herb garden and perennial beds, lavender offers attractive flowers as well as a pleasant, calming scent. An ancient herb used by the Romans and Greeks, lavender is also listed in Gerald's Herbal (1597). Although not much scientific validation exists, lavender has reputed properties as an antiseptic, an anti-inflammatory and as a wound healing agent. In Victorian times, it served as a household disinfectant as well as being treasured for its strong, clean fragrance, which is what most of us grow lavender for today.

Lavender is one of the most versatile and useful essential oils used for everything from soap to aromatherapy. It remains in high demand for the perfume industry even today. Copious numbers of flowers are distilled to produce their essential oil. For each acre of lavender grown, on average only 15 to 20 pounds of oil is produced, and that is during a good year.



Lavender in bloom. Photo by dmp.

Depending on the source, there may be anywhere from 25 to 47 species of lavender, probably because some species epithets are used interchangeably and because of natural as well as intentional hybridization. Lavenders call Mediterranean regions home but are now cultivated widely around the world. They are members of the mint family.

Most common are English lavender (*Lavendula angustifolia*) and French or Spanish lavender (*L. stoechas*). One can often pick up most intriguing looking French lavender plants, sometimes at grocery or big box stores. The whorls of purple or pink flowers somewhat resemble pine cones and are crowned with same colored bracts. They make delightful container plants but are marginally hardy here and may be best treated as annuals.

English lavender is not native to England but was brought there in the form of oil by the Romans. Plants were brought in during the thirteenth century and grew remarkably well. By the nineteenth century, England was a global lavender production center with plants grown for aromatic, decorative, culinary and medicinal purposes. Many are familiar with Yardley products, the original being the creation of a lavender scented soap during the reign of Charles I.

Crosses between English and spike lavender (*L. latifolia*) are classified as *L. x intermedia* and include selections such as 'Provence', 'Phenomenal' and 'Grosso'. Some are hardier than others so do check their USDA hardiness zones when purchasing plants.

Lavender refers not only to the name of the plant but also to the lovely purple shade of its flowers. Most species produce flowers of this soft violet-blue hue but pink and white flowering cultivars can be found. "Alba" is a white flowering variety while 'Jean Davis' blooms a pale pink. English lavenders are favored for their longer stems with heavily scented terminal flower spikes, 3 to 4 inches in length and with 6 to 8 whorls of lavender blossoms. Plants generally grow 2 to 3 feet high but there are dwarf cultivars. The grey-green foliage is also heavily scented.

Plant lavenders in perennial borders, as edging along a walkway, in herb gardens or in containers. Romantics may want to plant a hillside replicating the extensive lavender plantings in Europe. Regardless of your intent, lavenders require a sunny site with well-drained soil and a near-neutral pH to succeed. Fertilize sparingly, if at all and cut plants back to about 6 to 8 inches early in the season for bushy, floriferous plants. Wet feet, especially during the winter, is the bane of lavender growers. More plants will die from being too wet during the winter than too dry during the summer.

Stems can be cut for drying when blossoms are one-half to two-thirds open. Corral stems together with a rubber band or ribbon and hang in a dark, dry place for 1 to 3 weeks. The dried stems can be used in arrangements or the flower buds can be separated and used in potpourris, sachets, or for cooking. Small amounts of the strongly flavored lavender buds can be added to jams and jellies, fruit salads or used in baking.

For information on growing lavender or for other gardening questions, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.homegarden.cahnrc.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.