



Awash in Scent and Flower: Lavender / *Lavandula* spp.

The recorded use of *Lavandula* dates to ancient times. Lavender is thought to have been first domesticated by the Arabians and spread from Greece to northern Europe around 600 BC. Biblical references may not be recognized by most of us since it is referred to by the Greek name for lavender, *nardus*, translated as “spikenard,” the “very costly” ointment used to wash the feet of Christ. The Romans used lavender oils for bathing, as a disinfectant, and for perfuming the air, as well as in their cooking. It was also used in Egypt, Phoenicia, and Arabia to make perfumes and for mummification. In Latin, the word *lavandus* means “to be washed” and *lavare* “to wash”: these words form the botanical name *Lavandula* which we use today. In an interesting idiomatic twist, the laundresses of medieval Europe were called “lavenders” because of their use of the herb. Lavender was grown in medieval physic gardens in monasteries along with other medicinal herbs and was said to cure migraines, protect from the plague, and bring on romance – as well as to repel insects, perfume clothing, and soothe nerves. These therapeutic properties are still recognized in modern herbal medicine, which attests to lavender’s antiseptic, anti-inflammatory, anti-viral, bactericide, cicatrisant (quickly healing burns and wounds), sedative and anti-depressant qualities - among many others!

Lavender Today

Lavender is still a favorite in perfumes, lotions, soaps and bath products. It is used in sachets, dried flower arrangements, pressed-flower crafts and to make lavender wands which can be used in closets or in dresser drawers. Lavender is a staple in the art of aromatherapy, is used in natural insect-repellents, and has become a popular herb in the kitchen, especially in traditional Provençal recipes. It is also extremely useful in the kitchen when the cook is hampered by burns or cuts – this is one essential oil that can be applied without dilution and its healing properties are almost magical!

Queen of the Garden

It is in the garden, however that lavender truly reigns: a somewhat finicky and exacting ruler but rewarding to all of the senses. Lavender’s bluish, grey-green foliage has a softness to it that adds texture and depth to flower beds and perennial borders as well as in a formal herb garden. Depending on variety, the blooms appear between June and August and rise above the foliage in tall wands that sway gently in a breeze. The colors of the flowers range from light to dark purple to pink and white, and some varieties will re-bloom if deadheaded.

Choosing a Lavender

L. angustifolia / English Lavender: Narrow-leaved type used in cooking, best choice for the kitchen garden; deepest purple blooms; adds a romantic and cottage-style feel to the garden.

L. x intermedia / Lavandin, French or Spike Lavender: cross between *L. angustifolia* and *L. latifolia*; very fragrant and rich in oil; used for perfumes and aromatherapy; long stems, great for dried arrangements and crafts.

L. stoechas / Spanish Lavender, *L. viridis* / Yellow Lavender: Tender perennials usually wintered indoors in Zone 5; both flowers and leaves have a very resinous scent; unusual, tufted square blossoms which bring a blast of color to the garden.

Making a Lavender Bed

Lavender must be planted in full sun, in a spot with good air circulation. It can tolerate drier conditions and is generally not bothered by insect pests. Good drainage is the most important aspect of a successful lavender bed – careful preparation for well-drained, average soil which is not too rich in organic matter will yield the best results. Lavender also prefers a “sweet” or alkaline soil, so work some *Espoma Garden Lime* (dolomitic lime) in around the plant or top-dress with limestone pea gravel. Most varieties are hardy in Zones 5-8 but will appreciate some winter protection.

Pruning Lavender

If you prune lavender every year, this will encourage new growth and prevent woody stems from developing. Lavender is best pruned in the spring, once the danger of frost has passed. Only cut the leaves back by about a third. Never prune completely down to the woody part as there will be very little if any growth from the woody stems. If your plant is older and has woody stems and you want to reshape it, prune it back in stages over three years. The first year, prune one third of the branches down to a few inches above the woody stem, and then take of only one third of the length of all the rest of the branches. Do this again in the second and third year and you will minimize the shock of drastic pruning.

Drying Lavender:

Well-dried lavender flowers will keep their petals and fragrance for a long time. Cut the stems just before the flowers are fully open on a dry day in the morning. This is when the oil in the blossoms is strongest – before strong sun draws the oils out. Tie the blossom stems in bunches and hang them upside down in a dry, airy location that is warm but not hot. They can also be dried standing in an empty vase, but the stems may not end up completely straight. Flowers may be stripped from the stems and stored in an air-tight container when completely dry.

Lavender Choices

Botanical Name	Size	Flower/Foliage; Bloom Time	Notes
<i>Lavandula angustifolia</i> 'Hidcote'	H: 16-18" W: 12-15"	Deep purplish blue/gray; mid-June – late July	Free-flowering with long-lasting scent; compact habit great for edging; retains color well for crafts & dried arrangements
<i>Lavandula angustifolia</i> 'Munstead'	H: 12-16" W: 10-12"	Deep blue/gray; mid-June – late July	Early flowering; low growing; excellent for knot gardens and containers; retains color well, excellent for potpourris
<i>Lavandula angustifolia</i> 'Silver Edge'	H: 36-40" W: 18-24"	Light blue/grey-green, creamy margins; July – September	Medium-sized, upright flowers; evergreen; semi-open mounded form; wonderful in fresh cut arrangements
<i>Lavandula x intermedia</i> 'Grosso'	H: 24-30" W: 18-24"	Violet purple/silver-green; July – September	High yields of large, plump, very fragrant flowers; long stems; bushy mound; for oil, drying, sachets, edible flowers
<i>Lavandula x intermedia</i> 'Phenomenal'	H: 24-30" W: 48-54"	Bright blue-violet/silver-green; July – August	Repeat blooming with large flower heads; compact, round habit; vigorous, winter hardy and resistant to heat/humidity
<i>Lavandula x intermedia</i> 'Provence'	H: 24-36" W: 28-36"	Light mauve; silver-gray; July – September	Heavily scented, fat flowers; great for hedges; persists in damp winter soil; long stems best for drying & making wands
<i>Lavandula stoechas</i> 'Blueberry Ruffles'	H: 20-23" W: 18-21"	Dark & light blue/light green; June – August	All <i>L. stoechas</i> have unusual, chubby square spikes with fluttering “rabbit-ear” bracts - these two are 'Ruffles' series: Tender perennial; fragrant; early and repeat blooming; bushy mound; great heat, humidity & drought tolerance
<i>Lavandula stoechas</i> 'Boysenberry Ruffles'	H: 20-23" W: 18-21"	Purple & lilac/light green; June – August	
<i>Lavandula stoechas</i> 'Kew Red'	H: 18-24" W: 18-24"	Magenta & pink/grey-green; late May – September	
<i>Lavandula viridis</i> (Yellow Lavender)	H: 20-24" W: 24-30"	Green & creamy yellow/bright green; late June – September	Tender perennial; piney fragrance; profuse bloomer; good sized shrub; thrives in heat; good for grilling

“Lavender’s blue, dilly-dilly, Lavender’s green: When I am King, dilly-dilly, You shall be Queen!” Thanks to Lynn Wells for her work on this tip sheet!