



Lavender

Drying Lavender

Lavender, whether for pot-pourri or for drying, should be cut as soon as a good proportion of the lower leaves in the spike are out. . . If it is picked for drying and is laid too thickly, it soon goes moldy; it must be laid thinly and turned once or twice till it is dry enough to be safe.

—G. Jekyll, *Home and Garden*

For fragrance, form, and abundance of blooms, it's hard to find a better group of high-summer beauties. **Renee Shepherd**

SEVEN YEARS AGO I indulged all my lavender fantasies by planting a 60-foot-long border of the hybrid 'Grosso' down one side of my driveway. The plants charm me in every season with their gracefully rounded form, rich color, heady fragrance, and glorious abundance of blooms. I can't imagine a less demanding or more rewarding low hedge, or a better plant.

I have always felt a special affinity for lavender. My collection of plants provides me with a long season of pleasure in the garden, and the dried flowers—used in the kitchen and elsewhere—carry this connection indoors. For me, the lovely plants evoke a warm sense of continuity with many centuries of fellow plant lovers.

Probably native to Asia Minor, lavender followed the spread of ancient civilizations. Cultures as old as the Egyptians grew the plant and painstakingly extracted its aromatic oil as a perfume and preservative. The Romans brought lavender into all the territories of their empire, including England, as a bath

herb and for use in the laundry—the English word lavender may well come from the Latin *lavare*, to wash.

Over the centuries, the essential oil found in lavender stems, leaves, and flowers has served humans in a myriad of ways—to calm, soothe, heal, freshen, season, perfume, and enhance life in beneficial ways for countless generations. As landscape plants, in borders or as classically elegant container specimens, lavenders are captivating, long-season foliage plants, and when in bloom, their undulating wave of richly saturated colors and fragrances is the stuff of romance and memory.

There are more than 15 species of lavender, and most of them have many named varieties, with a wide assortment of flower forms and foliage colors. From the beautifully notched, silvery leaves and plump, smoky purple blossoms of *Lavandula dentata* (also called French lavender or fringed lavender) to the butterfly-like bracts that top the little pineapple-shaped flower heads of gray green *L. stoechas* (also called Spanish

lavender) to intriguing species lavenders like *L. viridis*, with its surprising yellow-green flower heads and apple-green foliage, lavender aficionados have no shortage of horticultural delights to choose from.

My favorite lavender is the hybrid '**Grosso**', which has deep violet flowers and a fragrance that is quintessentially lavender. Discovered in the early 1970s and named for French breeder Pierre Grosso, this is an interspecific hybrid between *L. angustifolia* and *L. latifolia*. The plants, which are hardy to USDA Zone 7, have sturdy gray-green narrow leaves with a subtle blue undertone. The foliage grows to about 18 inches tall, and after a few years plants are wider than they are tall. Starting in late May and continuing into July in my northern California garden, the richly colored flower heads bloom atop long upright stems, which reach as high as three feet.

Although '**Grosso**' has *L. latifolia* in its heritage, I think its other parent, *L. angustifolia*, provides the dominant olfactory note: sweetly pungent, with a hint of pine and citrus and maybe a touch of mint—my ideal in a lavender. (Not surprisingly, it is the mainstay of the essential-oil industry in France.) And with its long, sturdy stems topped by three- to five-inch flower bracts, '**Grosso**' is an excellent choice for those seeking flowers to cut and dry. After air-drying the flower stems, I fashion '**Grosso**' into wands, swags, and bunches, and use the loose flowers for potpourri.

The only other hybrid lavender readily available in this country is '**Provence**' (Zone 7). Its flowers are slightly lighter in color than those of '**Grosso**', and the plant has a more open habit. Although some growers think '**Provence**' has a sweeter scent, this is not the case in my garden. It is a handsome and generous plant, however, and well worth growing.

A wonderful recent addition to the ranks of lavenders is '**Goodwin Creek Gray**' (Zone 6), a natural hybrid discovered in 1991 by lavender experts Jim and Dottie Becker at their nursery, Goodwin Creek Gardens, in Williams, Oregon. The compact, well-shaped, two-foot plants have smooth, silver-gray foliage and long-lasting flower heads that are characteristically narrow and tapered with small, dark purple corollas. The Beckers believe it is a cross between *L. dentata* and *L. lanata*.

The fragrance of the foliage and flowers of '**Goodwin Creek Gray**' are more piney and resinous than those of my *L. angustifolia* and not to my taste, so I grow '**Goodwin Creek Gray**' for its outstanding ornamental value rather than for drying or culinary use. This plant is particularly valuable in the garden as it begins flowering early—early June in my garden—and goes on for seven weeks or more. '**Goodwin Creek Gray**' is also an excellent choice for containers. I have a quartet of them out on my brick patio in large terracotta pots scattered among my wooden lawn chairs. On sunny afternoons, they offer a delightful Mediterranean ambiance to the scene. These plants look striking against any dark-colored background, which sets off their lovely silver-gray leaves. The Beckers have also found that '**Goodwin Creek Gray**' does well in containers in regions such as the Southwest or Hawaii, where excess humidity is a frequent problem in growing good lavender.

The most popular and cold-tolerant lavender species, *L. angustifolia*, contains my other favorite named varieties, including the classic



L. stoechas

'**Grosso**'



How Low Can They Go?

While most of the *angustifolias* are hardy to Zone 5, it is possible to have success in colder zones. Gene Gage, of Papa Geno's nursery, located in Nebraska, has grown them successfully outdoors there and in Wisconsin, in Zone 4 and 3 condi-

tions. The key factors are providing protection from heaving soil caused by rapidly changing temperatures in early spring, and protecting plants from desiccation caused by cold winter winds. Cut plants back in fall by one-third, then mulch well and pro-

vide a windbreak. In spring, wait until plants begin to green up, then remove dead branches and reshape.

Other Garden Worthy Plants

Other *angustifolia* varieties worth seeking out for their foliage, fragrance, and flowers include a number developed by Tom DeBaggio, including: 'W. K. Doyle' (a.k.a. 'Twickel Dark Supreme'), 'Irene Doyle', and 'Tucker's Early Purple', and 'Twickel Purple', 'Croxtton's Wild', 'Nana Compacta', as well as 'Jean Davis' (pink), 'Alba' (white), 'Loddon Blue'.



angustifolia cultivar 'Hidcote' (Zone 5), which I love for its intensely colored, almost blue-purple velvety flowers and contrasting silvery foliage. 'Hidcote' has the softest, sweetest perfume of all lavenders, a full fruity bouquet with no piney or resinous overtones. And unlike many other selections, the plant's striking flower bracts hold their color after the floret petals drop, making the flowers especially long-lasting. Compact and tidy, 'Hidcote' reaches about 20 inches tall at maturity. The plant is said to have originated at American Lawrence Johnston's English home, Hidcote Manor, so growing it means participating in a long, shared history of great horticultural style.

In my garden, I have surrounded an old stone bird-bath with alternating clusters of 'Hidcote' (in groups

of three) and my other favorite *angustifolia*, pastel pink 'Rosea' (in pairs). The slim, soft-pink flowers of this compact, 20-inch plant bloom at the same time as 'Hidcote' and have a delicate, candylike perfume. Once its bloom is finished, 'Rosea' is not a particularly striking plant, although its narrow, silver-gray foliage is quietly attractive. But I love its pink flowers, which remind me of little girls' Easter dresses.

It's best to buy plants of 'Rosea' in bloom if possible, because the flower color varies, with plants ranging from very pastel to rosier shades. Unfortunately, the flowers do not hold their color when dried, but picked fresh and gathered into small nosegays with flowers of blue 'Hidcote', they provide me with a great deal of joy for about three weeks every spring. 🌿

Care and Feeding

The most important point to remember about lavender is that all lavender plants are native to the Mediterranean and thus prefer lean, fast-draining soils and hot sunny weather. They need at least six hours of direct sunlight to produce abundant bloom. Plants in filtered sunlight will bloom only lightly. They do best in soil that is on the alkaline side. If necessary, add horticultural lime at the recommended rates to raise the pH to between 6.4 and 8.3. If soil is at all

heavy or slow draining, plant in raised beds or mounds and consider amending with perlite or sharp sand at a ratio of roughly 1 to 10.

It's best to water plants at their base and avoid wetting their crowns. Drip irrigation is ideal for lavender, and should be laid at the drip line of the foliage. If you must use a sprinkler, water early in the morning so plants have plenty of time to dry in the sun, and avoid watering on overcast days.

Allow the soil to dry out between waterings.

Lavenders have few insect pests. If your plants have an outbreak of spittlebugs whose nymphs make little frothy white blobs on the foliage, don't worry. These insects are easily dispatched with a strong water spray or simple insecticidal soap spray.