

LAVENDER(*Lavandula angustifolia*)

Lavender has been a favorite herb for centuries. In herbal/flower language, lavender is used to mean friendship rather than romance. The historic use and recognition of lavender is almost as old as the history of man. As an herb, lavender has been in documented use for over 2,500 years. In ancient times, lavender was used for mummification and perfume by the Egyptians, Phoenicians, and peoples of Arabia. The Greeks and the Romans bathed in lavender-scented water and it was from the Latin word *lavo*, meaning “to wash”, that the herb took its name. Perhaps first domesticated by the Arabians, lavender spread across Europe from Greece. Around 600 BC, lavender may have come from the Greek Hyeres Islands into France and is now common in France, Spain, Italy and England. The “English” lavender varieties were not locally developed in England, but rather introduced in the 1600s around the time the first lavender plants were making their way to the Americas.

England’s Queen Elizabeth I valued lavender as a conserve and a perfume. It has been said that she commanded that the royal table should never be without conserve of lavender, and she issued orders to her gardeners that fresh lavender flowers should be available all year round! She also drank an abundance of lavender tea to help ease her migraines and used it as a body perfume.

Queen Victoria is most notable for making lavender popular across England, and it could be found, in one form or another, in every one of her rooms. She had it used to wash floors and furniture, freshen the air, and had it strewn among the linens. During the First World War, nurses bathed soldiers’ wounds with lavender washes.

English lavender (*angusta*) yields a highly-effective essential oil with very sweet overtones and can be used in balms, salves, perfumes, cosmetics, and topical applications. French lavender (*intermedia*) yields a similar essential oil, with higher contents of turpin, which adds a harsher overtone to the fragrance.

Essential oil of lavender has antiseptic and anti-inflammatory properties. An infusion of lavender is claimed to soothe and heal insect bites. Bunches of lavender are also said to ward off insects. If applied to the temples, lavender oil is said to soothe headaches. Lavender is frequently used as an aid to sleep and relaxation. Seeds and flowers of the plant are added to pillows and an infusion of three flower heads added to a cup of boiling water is recommended as a soothing and relaxing bedtime drink. Lavender oil is claimed to heal acne when used diluted 1:10 with water, rosewater, or witch hazel. It is also used in the treatment of skin burns and inflammatory conditions, and it is traditionally used in this way in Iran. There is scientific evidence to support the effectiveness of some of these remedies, especially the anti-inflammatory effects, but they should be used with caution because lavender oil can also be a powerful allergen. Ingesting lavender should be avoided during pregnancy and breastfeeding.

As with most plants, your success in growing this coveted plant will depend both on what kind of growing conditions you can provide and which varieties you select to grow. Lavender plants will tolerate many growing conditions, but they thrive in warm, well-drained soil and full sun. Like many plants grown for their essential oils, a lean soil will encourage a higher concentration of oils. An alkaline and especially chalky soil will enhance lavender’s fragrance. While you can grow lavender in zone 5, it is unlikely you will ever have a lavender hedge. More realistically, you can expect to have plants that will do well when the weather cooperates and to experience the occasional loss of a plant or two after a

severe winter or a wet, humid summer. Try to plant it where it will get sun eight hours a day. If you have your plants in container, less sun is better if you cannot water them as often as needed. Lavender is a tough plant and is extremely drought resistant, once established. However, when first starting your lavender plants, don't be afraid to give them a handful of compost in the planting hole and to keep them regularly watered during their first growing season. Lavender is great for attracting bees to your garden!

Thanks to Paula Barickman for this report on lavender.