

## Lavender

By Kathy Pearson

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Imagine sitting in a Mediterranean garden - the sun on your face and the scent of lavender filling the air. You only have to inhale the perfume fragrance of lavender to become a lover. Lavender evokes calm and awakens the senses. Its lovely fragrance, its drought tolerance, its ability to grow in sunny, rocky habitats and poor soils makes it a wonderful addition to El Dorado County gardens. Plus, it attracts bees, beneficial insects, birds and butterflies!

No gardener could miss the beauty of lavender, however, most are unaware of the diversity of colors, shapes and sizes, the genus *lavendula* produces. Faced with an array of more than 40 named varieties, it's no wonder it's difficult to decide which to choose. When purchasing lavender plants, choose those plants where the botanical name is identified. There are three hardy lavender varieties to showcase in EDC gardens: *Lavandula angustifolia* (English, True Lavender), *Lavandula x intermedia* (Lavandins, English Lavender) and *Lavender stoechas* (Spanish).

*L.angustifolia* is the hardiest of all the lavenders, has the broadest color range of all species, has mostly grey-green, narrow leaves and a fruity spicy delicate scent. Preferred for its aroma and for culinary purposes, *L.angustifolia* tends to be the shorter, more compact plant and blooms earlier than the Lavandins. Popular *angustifolia*s are the famous deep purple blooms of 'Hidcote', dark blue blooms of 'Lodden Blue', and the pastel pink of 'Melissa' and 'Jean Davis'. Prune in spring or fall.

*L.x intermedia* is a hybrid cross of *L.angustifolia* with *L.latifolia*. It has long-stemmed flowers with thick flower spikes and two secondary flower clusters below the primary one. Some common *L. x intermedia*s are 'Fred Boutin', 'Grosso', 'Provence', 'Seal' and 'White Spike'. Prune only in fall for blooms.

*L.stoechas* is very showy with compressed barrel shaped flowers, topped by colorful butterfly winged-like bracts. *Stoechas* will make your garden hum, blooming profusely in early spring and attracting pollinators to your fruit and nut trees. When finished blooming give it a good pruning. Although not preferred in the kitchen, *stoechas*' piney fragrance makes it an exceptional landscape plant. Favorite *stoechas* are purple 'Otto Quast', red 'Kew Red', blue /white 'Blueberry Ice' and pink 'Tickled Pink'.

Lavenders need full sun (6 hours) a day and sandy, well-drained soil to thrive. Optimum exposure to heat and sun will result in more fragrant blooms. Amend EDC soil with compost to help break up the red clay. A rule of thumb is to amend the garden soil in the planting area with equal parts of sand and organic compost. Mulch lavenders with white rock, or pea gravel (3/8"). Barks and wood chips can promote disease. Some believe that the reflection from white rock creates heat for the plant. Keep mulch away from the stem. Fertilizer is rarely required when organic matter is used in planting hole.

During their first and second years they need regular water, especially during summer heat and fall drought. Lavenders can be drought resistant after they come to maturity and are well established. Avoid overhead watering to prevent root rot. Lavenders cannot tolerate “wet feet”. Providing good air circulation between plants is a must. Pinch, prune and harvest lavenders to keep plants well shaped and to encourage new growth. Annual pruning can also avoid woody centers. Prune no more than 1/3 of the plant.

Harvesting lavender is one of the most enjoyable activities a gardener can experience. Harvest flower stems in the morning after dew evaporation. To keep the entire flower spike intact, cut when the first two flowers have opened. Hang tied bunches of lavender in a dry, dark place with good ventilation or individual stems across drying screen.

For those who don't have planting areas, lavender can thrive in pots. Lavender prefers a tight living space, a container that can accommodate the rootball with several inches to spare. Too large a container encourages excessive dampness. Water the containers year-round.

Both lavender flowers and foliage are fragrant. Lavender can be used for cooking, cut flowers, fragrance, and potpourri mixtures. When given as a gift, lavender flowers represent luck, purity and silence, a message of devotion.

Lavenders can brighten your gardens for 10+ years. Never hesitate to replace old woody plants. So many lavenders, never enough space - I think, the more, the better!

Learn more about lavender and other herbs at the free three-hour Master Gardener class on Saturday, May 19<sup>th</sup>. The class starts at 9:00 a.m. and is held in the Veterans Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Dr., in Placerville.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at [http://ucanr.org/sites/EDC\\_Master\\_Gardeners/](http://ucanr.org/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/). Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.org/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.