

Lavender

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Lavender is a well known and fragrant plant with gray-green foliage, upright flower spikes, and compact shrub form. In the garden, lavender makes an excellent companion plant for almost anything from roses to cabbage. It is one of those aromatic, gray herbs that deer avoid, making it a great choice as a decoy in your Hosta or daylily beds.

Another major reason lavender is so prized is that the flowers keep their fragrance when dried. For best drying results, harvest the flowers as the buds first begin to open. Hang in small bunches upside down in a warm spot with good air circulation. Besides being beautiful and aromatic, lavender flowers are also edible. They can be used raw in salads, added to soups and stews, used as a seasoning, baked into cookies and brewed into tea. Use sparingly; a little goes a long way.

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| Botanical Name | <i>Lavandula</i> |
| Common Name | Lavender |
| Plant Type | Short-lived herbaceous perennials |
| Mature Size | 20 to 24 inches tall and wide |
| Sun Exposure | Full sun |
| Soil Type | Well-draining soil |
| Soil pH | 6.7 to 7.3 |
| Bloom Time | Late spring to early summer |
| Flower Color | Purple, violet-blue, rose, pale pink, white, and yellow |
| Hardiness Zones | 5 to 9 |
| Native Areas | Europe, Eastern Africa, Southwest Asia, Southeast India, Mediterranean |

How to Grow Lavender

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-draining soil, and full sun.

Most lavenders are labeled hardy in USDA zones 5 to 9. While you can grow lavender in USDA Hardiness 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, but experience the occasional loss of a plant or two after a severe winter or a wet, humid summer. They are breeding ever tougher lavender plants, so that may change.

Unfortunately, even if you do everything right and your lavender plants appear happy, the genus is generally not long-lived and most lavender plants begin to decline after about 10 years. So keep starting new plants to carry you through your rough spots.

Light

Lavender plants thrive in full sun.

Soil

As with many plants grown for their essential oils, a lean soil will encourage a higher concentration of oils, so go easy on the organic matter and on the fertilizer. An alkaline or especially chalky soil will also enhance lavender's fragrance.

Water

Lavender is a resilient plant and is extremely drought-tolerant, once established. When first starting your lavender plants, keep them regularly watered during their first growing season.

Temperature and Humidity

It is dampness, more than cold, that is responsible for killing lavender plants. Dampness can come in the form of wet roots during the winter months or high humidity in the summer. If humidity is a problem, make sure you have plenty of space between your plants for air flow and always plant in a sunny location. Protect your lavender plants from harsh winter winds. Planting next to a stone or brick wall will provide additional heat and protection.

Fertilizer

Areas where the ground routinely freezes and thaws throughout the winter will benefit from a layer of mulch applied after the ground initially freezes. Don't be afraid to give them a handful of compost in the planting hole when you are first starting them.

Potting and Repotting

You can always grow your lavender in pots and move it to follow the sun, or even bring it indoors for the winter. Although lavender has a large, spreading root system, it prefers growing in a tight space. A pot that can accommodate the root ball with a couple of inches to spare would be a good choice. Too large a pot will only encourage excessive dampness.

Ensure that the container has good drainage. Root rot is one of the few problems experienced by lavender plants. Use a loose, soilless mix for planting and remember that container grown lavender will require more water than garden grown plants. How much more depends on the environment and the type of pot. Water when the soil, not the plant, appears dry and water at the base of the plant to limit dampness on the foliage.

Compact varieties make the best choices for containers. Some to try are *Lavandula angustifolia* "Nana Alba" and Spanish lavender (*Lavandula stoechas* subsp. *pedunculata*).

Pruning

Although lavender plants get regularly pruned simply by harvesting the flowers, to keep them well-shaped and to encourage new growth, a bit of spring pruning is in order. The taller varieties can be cut back by approximately one-third their height. Lower growing varieties can either be pruned back by a couple of inches or cut down to new growth.

If you live in an area where lavender suffers some winter die-back, don't even think about pruning your plants until you see some new green growth at the base of the plant. If you disturb the plants too soon in the season, they give up trying.

Varieties of Lavender

There are many varieties of lavender, with different types within each variety:

English Lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*) USDA Hardiness Zones 5 to 8:

- "Munstead" is an old-fashioned standard with blue-purple flowers, grows 18 inches tall.
- "Hidcote" is favored for its dark purple flowers, grows 24 inches tall.
- "Jean Davis" produces pale pink flower spikes, grows 18 inches tall.

Lavandin (*Lavandula x intermedia*) USDA Hardiness Zones 5 to 8:

- "Provence" dries particularly well, grows 30 inches tall.
- "Grosso" is highly disease resistant and fragrant, grows 30 inches tall

Fringed Lavender (*Lavandula dentata*) USDA Hardiness Zones 8 to 9:

- This is a bushy, spreading shrub that produces dense purple-blue flower spikes that are very pretty, but only mildly fragrant. It grows 3 feet tall.

French Lavender (*Lavandula stoechas*) USDA Hardiness Zones 8 to 9:

- A beautiful Mediterranean native that is compact and bushy with fragrant, dark purple flowers are topped by a feathery purple bract. Good cultivars include "Dark Eyes" and "Silver Frost."

Spanish Lavender (*Lavendula stoechas* subsp. *pedunculata*) USDA Hardiness Zones 9 to 10:

- This plant bears its flower stalks high above the foliage.