



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Lavender – A Classic Herb for your Central Valley Garden (July 20, 2024)

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Lavender appears in the gardens of many homeowners, as well as in commercial fields. It is an appealing and useful garden plant, also popular for herbalists and craftspersons. Lavender is prized for its fragrant flowers, aromatic oils, and numerous uses in cooking, cosmetics, and aromatherapy. The lavender plant is drought-tolerant and fragrant, an herb with attractive gray-green foliage, high visual interest, and lasting blooms that dry beautifully.



The botanical name for lavender is *Lavandula* (genus name). Lavender is in the mint family, *Lamiaceae*, along with sage, rosemary, and thyme. Lavender shares the following family characteristics with sage, rosemary, and thyme: opposite leaves, square stems, and a similar flower structure.

Most of us can agree that the fragrance of lavender has the power to transport us to memories of other times and other places. While we might tend to think of lavender as a rather old-fashioned and fussy herb, it is often described as "classic" with its spare and clean fragrance. In fact, the name lavender is derived from the Latin verb *lavare* - meaning "to wash." The Romans and Greeks scented their soaps and baths with lavender. As early as biblical times, in the gospel of Luke, there are references to lavender, called "spikenard" at that time. Lavender was also used in the mummification process in ancient Egypt.

So, history and science have placed lavender back some 2500 years. From its indigenous home in the western Mediterranean coastal region, lavender spread through the centuries. By the 1600s, lavender had become a beloved plant in English gardens. Its arrival in America happened soon after. The early use of lavender in this country was mostly of a medicinal nature.

Now, let's consider lavender in your garden. Remembering that lavender comes from the European Mediterranean areas where summers are dry and warm and winters rainy and cool, it is not surprising that it has adapted similarly elsewhere. Lavender grows best when planted in the fall in well-drained high gravel soils with low fertility. In fact, too much nitrogen yields a soft growth, and plants can break apart. Lavender will not tolerate wet soils that don't have good drainage. Lavender does need consistent moisture during the first few years. Once roots are established, only occasional watering is required.

Note: If these conditions don't sound like your garden, don't be discouraged from trying lavender. Except for very cold zones, there's probably a lavender cultivar suitable for you. Because lavender is not difficult to pollinate, new varieties are often offered to the public. Plant breeders are always seeking a better flower: better color, stronger plant, different bloom times, etc.

Now, let's check in to see what local experts have to say about the major lavender types and discover which are best for our area. For an overall view of lavenders, a large Central Valley wholesale nursery conveniently organizes the over 47 species of lavender and its 400 varieties into this basic top 5 group:



English (*Lavandula angustifolia*): This is the classic lavender with long spikes of fragrant flowers. There are many varieties of this species.

French (*Lavandula dentata*): French lavender is known for its distinctive toothed leaves, long-lasting blooms, and its resilience.

Spanish (*Lavandula stoechas*): These are stocky plants with short stems and vivid small purple flowers with leaf-like structures just beneath the flowers called "bracts."

Woolly (*Lavandula lanata*): It sprouts tall and is notable for its striking silvery foliage.

English hybrids (*Lavandula x intermedia*): These are known as lavandins. This group starts blooming just as English lavenders are finishing and continue to bloom to mid-summer. They have long gray leaves and grow large and fast.

Note: The naming for some of the lavender species and varieties is known to be a bit tangled and confusing, even for horticulturists. It is acknowledged that the terms English, French, Spanish, and German have often been used imprecisely. Not to worry, dear gardener: nursery personnel and plant labels will help guide you.

Let's talk specifically about which lavenders work best in our hot and dry California climate. Here are a few of the most popular and successful lavender choices recommended by the valley wholesale nursery industry confirmed absolutely by a large retail nursery.

Goodwin Creek Lavender (*Lavandula x gingsinii*) is an excellent local choice. This species is very heat tolerant and rugged. It grows up to 4 feet tall and wide.

French Lavender (*Lavandula dentata*) grows very well here in our valley. Its purple flowers, in short, rounded spikes, are topped with bracts (modified leaves just below the flower) that look like rabbit ears.

Munstead Lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*) is a little more finicky but has abundant small-size, very fragrant flower spikes. The Munstead plant bears deep purple flowers and silver-hued leaves.

Another best-selling cultivar is **Spanish Lavender** (*Lavandula stoechas*). It blooms spring to summer and is the most drought-tolerant of all lavenders.

If you want to try something different, **Riverina Thomas Lavender** (*Lavandula intermedia*) is a new triploid lavender with large flowers that is highly valued for commercial use. It yields five times the aromatic oil of their parent types. This is a midsummer repeat bloomer and is very showy and strong in the garden. (Note: A triploid, like the Riverina Thomas, generally means a plant with greater vigor, thicker leaves, and larger flowers.)

I would like to recommend a personal favorite to consider for your nursery list: a variegated lavender commonly called Meerlo (*Lavandula x 'meerlo*). It is a subshrub (short woody shrub) and features pale, muted green leaves with creamy serrated edges. It is very drought, humidity, and heat tolerant. Meerlo produces pale blue flowers on long, wiry stems from mid to late summer. It is certainly showy and happy in my own yard.

Finally, some finishing and review points about planting, pruning, feeding, and pests. It is best to plant lavender in the fall, which gives the plant time to establish before the start of summer heat. Lavender needs full sun; some afternoon shade may help it thrive. The perfect soil for lavender is well-drained, sandy, or gravelly soil. Once the plant is established, water it sparingly to avoid root rot.

To promote healthy growth, lavender plants should be pruned yearly in the spring or after bloom. Prune back 1-2 inches the first year and then about one-third of the plant in the following years. This pruning will help keep the plant from appearing woody. (Note: Pruning an old woody plant too radically will kill it.) Lavender plants do not need to be fertilized; too much fertilization can lead to plant weakness and less fragrant blooms.

Lavender is not often bothered by insect pests. They may occasionally attract spittlebugs, which are not usually a problem. Lavender is impressively deer-resistant, and snails shun it. Bees and butterflies love it.

After its long and interesting history, lavender is still a popular and distinguished plant, widely used and enjoyed in many ways all around the world. Here, too, in the Central Valley, growing lavender is a great choice for gardeners who appreciate its fragrance and versatility. Lavender is a low-maintenance herb that will provide years of enjoyment and a touch of "ancient" beauty in your garden, the same beauty that has been enjoyed for some 2500 years.

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Visalia Farmer's Market, 1st & 3rd Saturdays, 8 - 11 am, Tulare Co. Courthouse North parking lot
July 25 - Hanford Thursday Night Farmers' Market, 219 W Lacey Blvd, Hanford, 5:30 pm

Questions? Call the Master Gardeners:

Tulare County: (559) 684-3325, Tues & Thurs, 9:30-11:30;

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