

## Grow Lavender For Baking

Leimone Waite, Master Gardener, July 26, 2019



Lavandula angustifolia (Photo: High Country Gardens)

**Q:** I would like to plant some lavender to use for culinary purposes. When researching I have found hundreds of different lavender varieties. Can you recommend one that will work well in baking?

**A:** There are more than 450 varieties of lavender and over 45 different species of lavender according to the United States Lavender Growers Association but in the Redding three hardy lavender varieties are most common. These are: Lavandula angustifolia, English or True Lavender,

Lavandula x intermedia, Lavandins, and Lavandula stoechas, Spanish lavender.

Lavandula angustifolia is the hardiest of all the lavenders and has the broadest flower color range of all the species. Most L. angustifolia varieties have grey-green, narrow leaves and a fruity, spicy, delicate scent. This specie is the one most recommended for culinary purposes. To determine which varieties you will enjoy eating, taste the flower buds. Each variety has a distinctive taste just like wine grapes or hops. I was at a lavender farm last week and tasted two varieties I was not familiar with, I was surprised at how different they tasted from each other and from the “Munstead” variety that I have in my yard. English lavenders tend to be shorter, more compact plants and will bloom earlier than the Lavandins. Some popular varieties for culinary use are ‘Betty’s Blue’, ‘Royal Velvet’ and the pastel pink ‘Melissa’.



Spanish lavender, Lavandula stoechas (Photo: IHervas, Getty Images/iStockphoto)

The Lavandins are a hybrid cross of Lavandula angustifolia with Lavandula latifolia. Varieties of the specie have long-stemmed flowers with thick flower spikes and two secondary flower clusters below the primary one. This makes it popular to use for wand making and for essential oil production. For culinary purposes, the ‘Provence’ variety is popular for meats and savory sauces.

The Spanish lavender is very showy with purple compressed barrel shaped flowers, topped by colorful butterfly winged-like bracts. L stoechas species bloom profusely in early to mid-spring and attracts lots of bees to the garden. It is not preferred in the kitchen and is not used for essential oils or crafts but does make it an exceptional landscape plant.

I recommend purchasing lavender as plants, rather than seed. Be sure to choose plants where the botanical name is identified, this will insure you are getting the specie you want to grow. If you plan to start your own lavender plants, most lavender is best started from cuttings as seeds have a very poor germination rate.

All types of lavender plants need at least six hours of full sun per day and well-drained soil to thrive. If planting in our local red clay, or decomposed granite, amend the planting area with compost and plant

on mounds or a slope to increase drainage. It is better to mulch lavenders with white rock, or pea gravel as barks and wood chips can hold too much moisture around the roots and promote disease. Avoid overhead watering to prevent stem or root rot. Lavender plants do not tolerate “wet feet” and poor drainage is the number one reason plants die.

To harvest flowers for culinary purposes, cut flower stems in the morning after dew evaporation. Wait for most of the flowers on the spike to open and then cut stems back to main leaves. Hang tied bunches of lavender in a dry, dark place with good ventilation or place individual stems across a drying screen. Once dry, gently remove flower buds from the stems and store in jars for later use.

*The Shasta Master Gardeners Program can be reached by phone at 242-2219 or email [mastergardener@shastacollege.edu](mailto:mastergardener@shastacollege.edu). The gardener office is staffed by volunteers trained by the University of California to answer gardeners' questions using information based on scientific research.*