

*My six-year-old lavender plants are woody and falling apart. What have I done wrong? Should I plant some other variety? Jean W. San Luis Obispo*

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Local gardeners love lavenders; hardy sweet-smelling plants resistant to insect pests and deer. Lavender can live up to 20 years, but plants often get woody after six to eight years. Heavy soil and regular summer watering are primary reasons for this problem.

To encourage longer life, let plants dry out in summer before watering. If you have clay soil, plant on a slope and/or amend soil in the planting area. Lavenders prefer light, rocky soils and require little fertilization. Over-fertilizing is another reason plants quickly grow woody and break open. Fertilize them lightly the first year you plant them; they probably will not need further nutrients.

Regular pruning improves the looks of lavenders and prevents them from breaking apart. Start when plants are young, as it's hard to get back to a nice rounded shape if pruning is neglected. Prune after bloom or as you cut flowers in the summer. Cut off about 1/3 of the green growth at this time and shape up the outer edges of bushes to keep them rounded. If you didn't cut back after blooms faded, you can prune into fall (but not too late in the year in hard frost areas). Try regenerating a woody plant by pruning the remaining green down almost to the wood and hope for new growth. Dry wood on lavenders will not re-sprout, according to experts.

As for varieties to plant, choices are many. Most nurseries sell fast-growing, sturdy hybrid lavenders (*Lavandin*) such as Grosso and Provence—reputed to resist heat and fungus disease better than the English lavenders (*Lavandula angustifolia*). For drying, the English lavenders which come in several named varieties, retain color well. French (*Lavandula dentata*) or the early-blooming, fuchsia-colored Spanish (*Lavandula stoechas*) can be lightly cut after their first bloom to encourage summer re-bloom. Newer lavenders also come in white, pink and yellow as well as blues and purple.