

Lovely lavender

Lace your landscaping with this fragrant, decorative plant

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Question: I really like the look of lavender plants and am considering adding a few to my landscape. Might you be able to provide information on the different varieties and how to grow and care for them?

Answer: Ah, the sweet smell of lavender (*Lavandula*), a wonderful addition to most landscapes. This plant is a native of the Mediterranean region and is prized for its fragrant flowers and oil. And, it is quite desirable in many regions for being drought tolerant, almost deer-proof and easy to grow.

It is also a favorite of bees and butterflies. The addition of this plant to your landscape will encourage visits by these valuable insects. This pretty herbaceous plant is a semi-shrub, meaning it looks like a perennial with its soft green growth, with the mature sections turning woody after a few years of growth.

LOCATION

Before purchasing lavender plants, consider the location, making sure you have the correct conditions – these are not plants for a shaded, mossy, moist garden. They are sun worshipers, preferring at least six to eight hours of sun a day and good drainage; a gritty or sandy loam soil is preferable.

Depending on your soil, a few ways to encourage good drainage is to plant them in mounds, in raised beds or on a slope. They also appreciate good air circulation, so plant them 3 to 4 feet apart. They may look small and cute in the 4-inch pots when purchased, however, most will grow to be 2 to 3 feet tall and wide.

As mentioned, lavender is drought tolerant, so once established, it needs little water. The first year, water well on a regular basis and, once established, provide a deep soak when soil is almost dry. Using a drip system or soaker hose is an easy way to target the water just where



Top: Bees are among the pollinators attracted to lavender. Left: Spanish lavender's features include large, showy flowers with bracts that resemble rabbit ears.

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and when it is needed. Adding mulch is also helpful, placed around but not touching the base of the plant. Lavender requires little or no fertilizer, although plants grown in pots will require some fertilizer and more water.

Pruning is key to maintaining healthy, blooming lavender plants. The pruning process should begin when the plants are young, the goal being to keep the plant blooming for many years and slow down the formation of older woody growth. As plants get older, they tend to develop leafless woody branches, which don't produce new green growth, and thus no flowers.

A good time to prune is right after flowering. But if you miss that window, you can really do it any time, as long as it is before early spring. Since lavender flowers on new growth, you want to prune before the new growth appears. A pruning in the fall can also be helpful, as it is a good time to remove woody branches from the interior, thus improving air circulation

and removing brittle branches that may break in winter snow or ice.

When pruning mature plants, don't cut down into the leafless wood. Instead, cut just above the wood to a point where there are three leaf pairs. If a plant becomes mostly woody sections, it is likely time to replace the plant. So, if your schedule permits, pruning twice a year – spring and fall – is ideal. With regular pruning, lavender can last a good 10 years in a home garden.

VARIETIES

There are quite a few varieties of lavender, the most common being English lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*), Spanish lavender (*Lavandula stoechas*) and French lavender (*Lavandula dentata*).

• **English lavender:** Although from southern Europe near the Mediterranean, it is associated with the English-style gardens. It has a green-grayish foliage and purple flowers. But there are many cultivars; some are more dwarf in size, and some come in other colors

(pink, white, violet). It is the sweet, fragrant lavender commonly used in perfumes and sachets, as well as a flavoring for ice cream, jams, pastries and meat rubs.

• **Spanish lavender:** This lavender has larger, showy flowers with bracts that resemble rabbit ears. The blooms are typically deep purple but may also be pink or shades of purple. This plant is more stocky in shape with gray or gray-green leaves. It can at times self-seed, so you may end up with a "free" plant or two to share with friends. A light pruning after bloom may result in a second round of blooms. A heavy pruning in fall to reduce the size and woody sections before winter is suggested for this lavender.

• **French lavender:** Similar in size to English lavender, but it has leaves with square teeth-like edges, the species name comes from the Latin word for "having teeth" – *dentata*, sometimes referred to as tooth lavender. The flowers are similar to those of Spanish lavender; purple, short-rounded spikes and topped with a pair of flag-like bracts. This lavender is not as hardy as the others and may be damaged by our coldest winter days.

Lavender is quite forgiving and easy to grow. With minimal care, and a good pruning at least once a year, you can enjoy fragrant blossoms, bees and butterflies in your landscape every summer. And, by planting a combination of English, Spanish and French lavenders, you will have an assortment of colors and variety of blooms over an extended period of time.

Do you have a gardening question? Please e-mail, call or visit the Douglas County Master Gardeners Plant Clinic at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, 541-236-3052 or 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.