

Lovely, lovely lavender

How to make sure your garden's purple plants are happy and healthy



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Ask a Master Gardener

Question: I have a lavender plant that has a lot of dead wood on it. I'd like to cut out the unsightly wood, but is this a good time to do so? And do you have any tips on caring for lavender?

Answer: Lavender, a perennial subshrub in the aromatic mint family, is a lovely addition to any landscape because of its eye-catching purple blooms and contrasting leaf color that give off a heavenly fragrance.

Lavender is also a magnet for bees and other pollinators, especially bumble bees whose long tongues have an easier time accessing the tubular flowers. Lavenders also don't require much water and, because they have few pest or disease problems, are low maintenance as well.

Flowers come in a variety of choices — not only dozens of purple shades, but also white, light pink and fuchsia.

Native to the mountainous regions north of the Mediterranean and hardy from zones 5-8, English lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*) is so named because it's one of the few lavenders able to be grown in English gardens. English lavender grows in a mound shape, 18 inches to 2 feet across. Older branches turn woody eventually while new shoots, which develop flowers each year, are herbaceous.

Oil glands on the flower calyx produce most of the lavender oils which are used in scenting perfumes, shampoos and soaps. About 60 pounds of flowers are needed to produce one pound of lavender oil. Sachets and potpourris make use of dried lavender flowers. There are hundreds of varieties of English lavender, including Hidcote, Munstead and Purple Bouquet.

Another species of lavender is Spanish lavender (*Lavandula stoechas*) which has a distinctive flower resembling a tiny purple pineapple. Since it is native to Spain, Turkey and North Africa, it thrives in hotter, drier climates and is not as cold-hardy.

Spanish lavender needs a location in full sun, good drainage and air circulation around the plant, with only moderate irrigation in the summer. Mulching with pea gravel is preferred over bark mulch, and it prefers a slightly acidic to neutral soil pH.

Its oils are not as high in content as English lavender. Spanish lavender has the bonus of flowering more than once, extending the color show into the summer months if pruned in early spring.

Lavender is a showy addition to any herb garden, but can also sparkle in the average home landscape with careful attention given to site selection and maintenance. Lavender should be grouped with other plants such as yarrow, rosemary, coneflower and sea thrift that have the same kind of requirements such as slightly acidic soil pH, full sun, good drainage and low water.



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Be sure not to crowd lavender with other perennials — give it space enough to breathe. Lavender does not like high humidity, so placing it amongst rocks, near a south-facing stone wall or near a hot concrete sidewalk or driveway will keep it happy.

Now to your question on pruning lavender. Since lavender flowers on new growth, you should plan on pruning every year after it's established. Prune the bush back in early spring when green leaves begin to emerge from the base, being careful not to prune into dead wood. Remove approximately 1/3 off the top.

This will keep the plant young and vigorous, encouraging compact growth. A light summertime pruning after bloom will encourage re-blooming. Most

lavender plants can hold their shape for at least 10 years if pruned regularly.

Depending on the amount of dead wood on your lavender, you could prune it back to 8 inch stubs, within three sets of leaves on the stems, but do this only in March or early spring. This heavy pruning requires fertilizer and more water to encourage new growth on the woody stems.

If you don't get any new growth in two months after doing so, you may need to just replace the whole plant, and commit to a more regular, yearly pruning for the new lavender. Plant new lavender in the fall, 2-3 feet apart, if planting more than one.

When harvesting the blooms and stems, do this in the morning hours

when the oils are the most concentrated and half of the flower buds have opened. Cut the stems as long as possible, forming bundles of stems, and securing them with rubber bands which will contract as the stems dry out. Hang the bundles of harvested lavender in a cool, dark place which has good air circulation 'til thoroughly dried.

It's easy to see why lavender has been such a popular herb for centuries with its soothing fragrance, medicinal properties and striking color. Lavender is a great choice for any garden.

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