

The Herbalist

By Dr. Kathy Girard, URI Master Gardener



Lavender (*Lavendula*, various species; Family Labiatae)

Lavender has fragrant, narrow, blunt tipped, grayish leaves that are covered with a mealy white down. The plant grows to about 2½ feet tall with woody stems at the base. The whorled flowers appear on leafless spikes in June. Lavender flowers should be cut for drying just before the bottom rows of flowers begin to open to retain their lovely lavender blue color and clean, fresh scent.

There are many varieties of lavender with varying degrees of hardiness. *Lavender spica*, the true lavender of the essential oil industry is grown in great fields in France. *Lavender vera*, or English lavender, is the most widely known in the United States while *L. stoechas* is the French lavender. If the flowers are wanted, English lavender should be grown.

Lavender is difficult to start from seed since it needs a long, cool germination period and seedlings will only grow 2 to 3 inches the first year. Most growers prefer to purchase a started plant which should be planted in a light, friable, alkaline (pH 7) soil. This herb prefers a sunny location and a warm soil so it is best not to mulch it.

When plants are three years old they may be propagated by cuttings or layered divisions. Take cuttings from the woody stems, dip in a rooting medium, and place in sand or perlite. Whole plants must be lifted to divide them. Lavender has long, stringy, black roots, but at the base of each clump many small rootlets are evident. Pull or cut apart, replant the divisions immediately and water well.

Plants should be trimmed in August and covered with salt marsh hay in November to help them survive the winter. English lavender will winter the best but will require a southern location and a windbreak to do so.

Lavender has been used since ancient times by the Romans and Greeks in baths and soaps. Its name probably came from the Latin, "lavare", to wash. In Victorian England, the flowers were used to make lavender conserve, and a small amount of ground flowers can be added to sugar cookies to make an unusual dessert. Up until World War I, this herb was used as an antiseptic for wounds and to rid the body of worms. Today its main use is in sachets and pillows and to perfume linens. It is said to repel moths, flies, and mosquitoes and its scent aids deep sleep and soothes nervousness and tension.