

Way to Grow in Orinda

Lavender – A Triple Sensory Sensation

Steve & Cathy Lambert



Lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*) a hardy perennial known for its soothing fragrance, vibrant purple-blue blooms and bitter-sweet flavor, provides pleasure for all of your senses. Lavender is a great choice for Orinda gardens as our moderate climate is quite similar to that of the Western Mediterranean where most varieties of lavender originated.

Lavenders like lots of sun, good air circulation, and well drained soil. When adding lavender to your garden, choose a high sun exposure area with plenty of space around your plant, based on its mature size, to allow for good air flow. Humidity and excess moisture from over-watering or poor drainage are extremely harmful for lavender and will result in rot and ultimately the death of your plant. For this reason, never plant your lavenders close to a lawn or other landscape plants that require significantly more water. Since most of our Orinda soils are clay, which tends to hold water longer, it's best to choose varieties of lavender that can handle heavier soil, (see recommendations below) or amend your soil with coarse sand or ground lava rock (Scoria).

Lavender plants don't require much fertilization. A bit of compost used as a mulch around the base of the plant is usually enough to produce healthy growth. Water your lavenders only when the soil is dry.

Lavenders respond best to harsh pruning which helps promote healthier plant growth. Lavenders will bloom more often (two to three times a year) if their blooms are cut back after each flowering. Cut the stem back about one inch past the green leafy growth. Then in the fall, prune back the top third of your plant.

The ideal time to harvest your lavender flowers is when the blooms have just burst out of their protective covers (calyx). The long, tall stalks of your lavender blooms should be hand snipped at their base again about one inch below the first leaves. Our preferred tool for this job is sheep shearing clippers which helps speed up the process. Harvest the flowers during cool, dry weather to preserve their fragrance. Strip leaves

from the end of the stems then tie small clusters of clippings together, and hang upside down to dry in a cool, dry space. For fresh, floral arrangements, lavenders should be added immediately after cutting.

There are many ways to enjoy lavender flowers not only for their renowned, calming smell but also in cooking where a few small blooms will add a bitter-sweet flavor and fragrance to roasted meats, such as lamb and fish, as well as in tea, lemonade and even ice cream! It's easy to create great



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Blue River Lavender adds color and fragrance to any garden.

scented gifts using your dried lavender blooms after pruning. Even your kids can have fun making potpourri, drawer or closet sachets (not only for the wonderful smell, but also to help repel moths) and relaxing, perfumed bath blends using lavender, oatmeal and rosemary.

Honey bees love lavender too. In fact, you can purchase "lavender honey" made from hives where the bees collected nectar primarily from lavender plants. On the down side, because honey bees are so attracted to it, lavender would be a poor choice of plants if anyone in your family is allergic to bee stings. We have a cli-

ent who had a beautiful, lavender lined pathway leading to her front door. She also has two small granddaughters who, like most kids, were afraid of bees. They hated walking the path to grandma's front door and called it the "tunnel of bees." As much as she loves lavender, she loves her granddaughters more and had us remove most of these lovely plants.

Over years of planting many varieties of English, Spanish, and intermedia lavenders, we have determined the following list to be proven to thrive in our Orinda climate and heavier clay soil.

English or *Angustifolia* lavenders – Some popular choices such as Hidcote and Munsted don't do well in our adobe soil so go with the following varieties instead: Blue cushion, Blue River, or Royal Velvet. Another good choice for a taller (18-36") English lavender is Twickle purple.

Spanish or *Stoechas* lavenders have a

plant structure very similar to English lavenders but the foliage is grey rather than green. Their flowers are distinctly different with "rabbit ear" petals on the top of their bloom. In the Spanish varieties, we've had great success with Madrid Blue with steel grey foliage, blue flowers and white rabbit ears. It grows to 22" high. Otto Quast has dark blooms and light purple rabbit ears. A newer variety we've discovered is Blue Star. It has greenish, grey leaves and flowers that are a deep burgundy shade of purple.

Intermedia lavenders are similar to English lavenders in shape and size. Provence

is a very large (3-4') lavender with bluish, purple blooms. Super is another great lavender that has earned a place in our own garden. It is similar to Provence but with pinker flowers. Dutch is probably our favorite lavender. It's a very strong plant with bold purple flowers.

If you have any questions on this "Way to Grow" article please email us at office@gardenlightslandscape.com.