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Lavenders for California Gardens

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Lavender is a delightful and useful garden plant. It can be used as a drought-tolerant low hedge, a specimen plant, a cut flower, and an herb that provides a fragrant addition to any garden. As garden ornamentals, lavenders have attractive gray-green foliage and eye-catching, long lasting blooms.

Many uses: The name "lavender" comes from the Latin lavare, meaning "to bathe." Hence it has a strong association with cleansing, aromatic pleasure, and burning of incense to clean the air in places such as hospitals and public buildings.

In terms of its herbal uses, the flower consists of 0.5 to 2% by weight volatile oil that contains several organic constituents. Medicinally, these chemicals act to aid digestion, increase superficial blood circulation, and have been used as antispasmodics and anti depressants. Lavender, with its cool, relaxing scent is also used, as a natural sleep aid.

In culinary use, flowers from English lavenders are used in herbal teas, cookies, and ice cream, but lavender's best uses are in cosmetics and fragrances. Lavender is used in aromatherapy, as a relaxant, and as an antiseptic. Its oils are prized for soap fragrances, for aromatic baths, potpourri and sachets, facial oil, massage oil, floral water, compresses, perfume, facial steam, and inhalation.

Taxonomy: Lavender is in the mint family and belongs to the genus Lavandula. The nomenclature of lavenders is confusing. In the nursery trade, invalid names from the past are sometimes still used. For example, English lavender (now known as L. angustifolia) was previously referred to in the literature as L. officinalis, L. vera and L. spica. The correct names now in use describe the leaf shape. In Latin, angustifolia means "narrow-leafed," while latifolia means "broadleafed." When you see "L. x intermedia," it means the plant is a hybrid between L. angustifolia and L. latifolia and has intermediate leaf characteristics, hence its botanical name intermedia.

The numerous cultivars of English lavenders include dwarf forms (Compacta and Compacta Nana), pink-flowered (Jean Davis or Lodden Pink), blue-flowered (Graves, Grey Lady and Irene Doyle), and the large purple-flowered selections (Twickel, Purple Hidcote, Munstead, and Vera). Lavender Lady is excellent for garden use. It is unique because it can be grown fairly quickly from seed and will bloom in the first year.

The hybrid Lavandins produce good-quality long-stemmed flowers, but they tend to turn grayish in color upon drying. English lavenders (specifically Hidcote and Royal Velvet hybrids) yield shorter-stemmed flowers but retain an excellent blue color when dried. Temperatures during the drying period have a significant effect on the final flower color since higher ambient temperatures can cause a bleaching effect.

Growing: Lavenders are native to the Mediterranean areas of Europe, which experience warm, dry summers and cool, rainy winters. They grow best in full sun in well-drained gravelly soils with low fertility. Excessive nitrogen encourages soft, succulent growth leading to plants breaking apart in the center. They will not tolerate wet, poorly-drained soils. In soils that have slower drainage, consider planting on mounds to drain excess water away from the root crown.

Irrigation is needed, however, in dry areas while the plants are being established. Drip irrigation systems are recommended, since overhead watering tends to break the plants apart and promotes disease. A soil pH of 6.5 to 7.5 is best.

Prune lavenders as you harvest the flower stalk. In a garden situation, even if you are not planning to harvest the crop, the best time to prune is just after the plants have completed their flowering cycle.

Pest Control: The most frequent problems associated with lavenders are related to root and crown rots, usually the result of too much water or poor drainage in heavy soils. Excessive irrigation during summer months, overhead watering, and too much moisture near the main stem can also lead to root, stem and crown rot. When using drip irrigation, place the emitters several inches away from the stem.

Lavenders are not often bothered by insect pests, although they may occasionally attract spittlebugs (Philaenus spumarius). These insects are not usually a problem unless the plants are being grown for cut flowers and the spittle is in the flower heads.

October is the best planting month of the year in the southern San Joaquin Valley and a great time to plant Mediterranean adapted plants. Shop your nursery for some lovely lavenders and plant them today.