

Learning about Lavender
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Last spring I engaged with several hundred third graders at the annual Tri-County Project RED (Rural Education Day) at the Armada Agricultural Society's Fair Grounds in Michigan. What fun watching curious little faces when I introduced myself as a lavender farmer. "Do you know what lavender is?" I asked.

A hand shot up. "It's a color!"

I'm always amused when that happens, especially with kids and old timers who are third and fourth generation farmers. It's a perfect segue into my little lecture about how to grow the bundle of benefits that smells like heaven.

First, I invited the students to run their hands over the tops of a few flats of lavender plugs. I smiled as they put their fingers to their nose, inhaled, closed their eyes, and fell in love at first sniff. If they're like me, they're hooked. They'll never forget that scent. It's in their brain forever.

"Lavender helps you relax," I explained. "It's like a good medicine. That's one of its many benefits."

"Then let's take some plants back to our classroom," a teacher said with a wry smile.

"What makes it smell so good?" a little blond girl asked.

"Lavender is from the mint family," I said. "And like most mints, it's the oil in lavender that makes it smell and taste good."

Taste good? Oh yes, I continued, and told them about lavender brownies, shortbread, muffins, banana cake and baked chicken.

“Lavender is an herb, and herbs are the spice of life. How many of you like spaghetti?” I asked.

Almost everyone raised an enthusiastic arm.

“Did you know spaghetti is loaded with spices?”

By that point their little hands were in the open bag of potting soil, longing to pot a plant. I had to move fast: snip the end roots of the plug with scissors and explain they need to be loose to get a good start. I shook down and tamped the soil around the plant in the pot. Teachers and parents leaned over the huddle of children to watch and listen. What a Kodak moment.

I told them lavender isn't fussy. It doesn't much care about the type of soil, as long as it drains well and has lots of sun and room to grow. It's a Mediterranean plant, I elaborated. And the Mediterranean is hot, sunny and rocky.

“Like Italy?” asked a bright-eyed boy.

“Yes, like Italy and Spain and southern France.”

If they had been a bit older, I would've told them the best soil for growing lavender is a gritty or sandy loam with a pH factor between 6.0 and 8.0. That's why Provence, France is famous for lavender fields where it also grows naturally in well-drained calcareous (limestone-derived) ground. But if your soil is clay and atmosphere humid, plant lavender in mounds to keep the roots dry and foliage aerated. Otherwise, the roots will rot and the plant will mildew.

“A sub-shrub, once lavender roots are established, they don't like wet feet,” I continue. “Mature lavender loves it hot. I typically don't have to water my plants during a brief dry spell. But you'll have to water mature lavender during a sustained drought. If

you don't, the roots become vulnerable to diseases. And when lavender in full bloom, they wave their beautiful, purple wands and release their scent in a gentle wind. You can smell it in the air.”

A student surprised me and asked, “Does lavender come back every year?”

I explained the difference between perennial and annual in terms of our climate, contrasting the foliage of the hardy cultivars (*Lavandula angustifolia* and *Lavandula x intermedia*) to the tender cultivars (*stoechas* and *dentata*), avoiding the nomenclature nightmare that makes me break out in a sweat.

I gave this basic guideline more to the adults than their charges: if a lavender plant has ferny or serrated leaves, it's tender and won't make it through a Michigan winter. But the *stoechas* (Spanish) and *dentata* (French or “toothed” lavender) make showy, aromatic annuals and container plants that will bloom their feathery bracts until snowfall. Then they're history unless brought indoors to over-winter.

No, you don't need to fertilize lavender. But composting is a good idea for healthy nutrition. And during drought, pull greedy weeds that suck moisture from the earth at the base of the plant. Remember when you're planting, lavender is an independent lady, and doesn't like to be crowded, even with her own kind. She's particularly claustrophobic in the shadow of a neighboring lily patch, peony bush or invasive silver king.

Lavender thrives in the open air, the center of attention as a fragrant border of a sunny garden or path to brush against, so consider this when you design your garden. With the host of hardy lavender varieties, you can plant for continuous color, alluring effect and long-term productivity in your landscape.

“When do you plant lavender?” a parent asked.

“Most people are in the habit of planting flowers in the spring, but perennials love to be rooted in the cool of fall,” I explained. “Just plant them before mid-October so they can root well before the ground freezes.”

“How long will a plant live? Can you eat the green part?” a student asked.

“Well, if you plant it where it’s happy, well-drained soil, sun and air, and prune it in the spring, lavender can bloom for twenty years or longer,” I said. “And yes, you can eat the green part. Every part of the lavender plant is fragrant and edible. But it’s the buds on the end of the stems we mostly use for tea, baking, cooking and sniffing.”

Hoarse after projecting to ten classes of third-graders, I drove home, drank a pot of steamy Earl Grey lavender tea and took a nap. Ah yes, lavender is much more than just a color.

Sidebar:

Hardy lavender varieties for your garden:

***Lavandula angustifolia* (English lavender):**

- ◆ Blue Cushion: dwarf habit; container, herb garden and border
- ◆ Hidcote: deepest purple, medium stem, blooms first year; blooms all summer
- ◆ Jean Davis: pale pink flowers, dwarf habit, evergreen: doesn’t bloom first year; May/June/July bloomer
- ◆ Miss Katherine: long, pink flowers on tall stems
- ◆ Munstead: deep purple flowers, blooms first year; blooms all summer
- ◆ Royal Velvet: longest stems in species; long, dark purple flower heads, green foliage
- ◆ Twickle Purple: sweetly fragrant; narrow oblong leaves; purple flowers fade to blue

***Lavandula x-intermedia* (Lavandin: hybrid of French and English lavenders):**

- ◆ Fred Boutin: large plant; slender stems with narrow lavender-blue flowers; light foliage
- ◆ Grosso: large plant; extremely fragrant deep violet flowers; butterfly magnet; blooms July
- ◆ Hidcote Giant: light lavender flowers; larger plant than English Hidcote
- ◆ Provence: large plant; subtle lavender-blue flowers; rot-resistant foliage; blooms July
- ◆ Silver Edge: variegated foliage with blue-green centers; compact with violet-blue flowers in July and August

Tender lavender varieties:

Dentata (French lavender): tender; toothed silver-green leaves; ideal for containers; blooms all summer

Stoechas (Spanish lavender): tender; fast growing; silvery foliage; protruding petals; blooms all summer

Goodwin Creek: small, intense purple flowers on long stems; hairy foliage

Sidebar:

A, B, Cs of growing lavender:

A: Well drained soil

B: Full sun

C: Good air circulation

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