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Non-native lavender is a great landscaping choice

By SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS
FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT



A bee collects pollen from Franch lavender along the North Sonoma Mountain Trail in Santa Rosa.
Christopher Chung/The Press Democrat 2017

Question: Is lavender a good landscape choice even though it isn't a native California plant?

Answer: Yes, lavender is one of the most popular landscape plants in Sonoma County, and rightly so. It's an easy-to-grow perennial that requires little water or fertilization, making it well-suited for our climate. It attracts beneficial insects, is deer- and snail-resistant and has few pests or diseases. In addition to providing color and scent in the garden, dried lavender repels insects in the home and adds flavor to delicate foods and beverages.

Lavender is native to Mediterranean regions in Europe, where it has been used for thousands of years. Ancient Egyptians used it in perfume and incense. Greeks and

Romans put lavender in herbal baths. In the Middle Ages people used it as an aphrodisiac and scattered it over floors as a disinfectant and deodorant.

In the past lavender has been used to embalm corpses, cure animals of lice, tame lions and tigers, repel mosquitoes, flavor snuff, and has been added to special lacquers and varnishes.

Three main types of lavenders grow in our region: Spanish (*Lavandula stoechas* and cultivars), English (*Lavandula angustifolia*), and English cultivars known as Lavendins (*Lavandula x intermedia*).

Spanish lavenders are the most drought tolerant and the first to blossom in spring. They have the showiest flowers, with pineapple-shaped tufts in purple, periwinkle or white. "Otto Quast" is a popular variety.

English lavenders are the hardiest but are short lived and must be replaced every 3 to 5 years.

They blossom in early summer on slender spikes and have a sweeter scent than the Spanish variety. Flowers come in shades of blue and purple, white, or pink.

"Hidcote," "Munstead," and "Jean Davis" are popular varieties.

Lavendins are the last to bloom, from mid- to late summer, and grow the tallest. They also have the strongest fragrance and are used in the cosmetics industry. "Provence" and "Grosso" are popular varieties.

Some local nurseries offer additional varieties, such as French lavender (*Lavandula dentata*), wooly lavender (*Lavandula lanata*), or a hybrid cross of those two called ' Goodwin Creek Grey' (*Lavandula x gingsii*). You can also find dwarf lavenders that grow only 12 to 18 inches high.

Care and cultivation

Lavender grows best when it gets at least 6 hours of full sun a day. It prefers well-draining soil of low fertility. You can plant it any time between spring through fall.

If your soil is heavy or compacted, amend it with compost or perlite to improve drainage, and plant on slightly raised mounds to avoid water pooling around the plants. Regularly water plants the first year or two.

Once established, lavender is fairly drought tolerant but still may need some moisture during the growing season. Avoid adding fertilizer as it can lead to leggy growth and a decrease in blossoms and fragrance.

The most common lavender disease is due to Phytophthora, a fungal root rot, usually caused by overwatering or poor drainage. Symptoms include wilting, yellowing or dying leaves.

Make sure you place drip emitters several inches away from the stems and regularly check the moisture level of the soil during the watering season. Lavender plants occasionally attract spittlebugs, though they generally do not harm the plant and you can easily hose them off.

The best time to prune lavender is soon after it stops blooming.

Young or small plants need little pruning other than shaping and removing old flower stalks. Prune larger plants after blooming, once or twice a year.

Do not remove more than a third of the plant's height at one time.

Prune plants to form a rounded dome and do not cut down to the woody base as it will not generate new leaves.

You can propagate lavender from seeds, cuttings, or plant division, but the cuttings method is easiest.

Take a cutting right after it blooms. Cut a stem without flower buds and remove the bottom leaves.

Stick the cutting in a pot of sterile potting mix and water regularly. It should start to develop roots in about three weeks. When the new plant has developed a vigorous root system, harden it off by gradually exposing it to outdoor growing conditions.

For more on growing lavender:

Information about Lavender: tinyurl.com/42dca47t

Lavenders for California Gardens: tinyurl.com/2fj2ykrf

Contributors to this week's column were Wendy Stern, Karen Felker and Patricia Decker. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County sonomamg.ucanr.edu/ provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.