

Lavender: An Introduction to Herbs

An Ebook by Terri May and Melinda Hall



Table of Contents

Contents

Lavender, My First Love of Herbs	1
Lavender (<i>Lavandula</i>) – Historical Background and Lore .	3
Lavender Oat Cookies	5
References	6

Lavender, My First Love of Herbs

I remember the first time I was introduced to herbs. I was helping my Grandmother May with her weekly laundry, and as we tucked her newly folded night gowns into her dresser drawer, I noticed a small gauzy packet tucked in among her clothes. She called it a sachet, and it smelled faintly of fancy perfume and her herb garden.

Upon closer inspection, I noticed tiny silver-purple dried flower buds wrapped in that gauze. She told me this was lavender. It smelled sharp and clean. She gave me my own tiny packet of lavender and I felt quite grown up as I tucked it into my underwear drawer. Thus began my love of herbs.

My first batch of natural herbal soap that I crafted was with Lavender essential oil and dried buds; and I have planted Lavender in every garden that I have grown as I moved from place to place, even on my kitchen window sills. As I consider my newest gardening endeavors here in Indiana, Lavender is on the top of my list.

Lavender, or *Lavandula officinalis*, is a perennial member of the mint family. It likely originated in the Mediterranean, Middle East, and India. The best known is English Lavender (*L. angustifolia*), which grows between 3-6 feet with dusty blue-green foliage and spiky purplish/pink flowers.

It is often used to soothe headaches and is beneficial in easing the nervous system and the stomach. It awakens the mind and heart after a long winter and can be used to treat depression and lethargy. It is energizing, revitalizing, and inspires hope.

Dream pillows stuffed with dried lavender buds and scented with the essential oil brings soothing, relaxed dreams, and a sound sleep.

One of the many benefits of Lavender that I have only recently discovered is its ability to soothe minor burns, insect stings, and minor cuts and abrasions. Plus, internally it can ease heartburn and indigestion when taken as a tea.

Lavender is an essential ingredient in *herbes de Provence*, an important cooking accent to many French dishes. My personal favorite includes the dried buds in Lavender Oat cookies. (See the [Lavender Oat Cookies Recipe](#)).

Lavender is a perennial that grows best in a sunny, well-drained area of your garden. Lavender normally is an easy herb to grow, but really does not care for a wet, cold environment. The blossoms, lanky spikes of purplish-pink tight buds, can be harvested once they just begin to open and can be dried for future use or placed in a vase of water to enrich your air with a tantalizing fresh fragrance that will last about a week.

Lavender is easily dried by tying a bunch of lavender flower spikes, about an inch in diameter, and hanging upside down in a ventilated area. You may want to place a clean cloth underneath to capture the buds that fall during the drying process.

For me, Lavender is an essential herb to be included in my apothecary. Both the dried buds and the essential oil are beneficial for many healing applications that come up in my family. It is also one of my most favorite scents for herbal soaps, lotions, and dream pillows.

Lavender (*Lavandula*) – Historical Background and Lore

The use of lavender is nearly as old as recorded history. Ancient Egyptians and Arabians used lavender oils for perfumes and mummification. The linen wraps, soaked in lavender essence, repelled insects, countered unpleasant odors, and may have been believed to be spiritually protective. Some mystics also believed that lavender contributed to long life and acceptance of aging. Cleopatra is rumored to have seduced Julius Caesar and Mark Antony with the aid of lavender. This is logical, since many people of the time smelled strongly of sweat, smoke, and oxen. Even in ancient times, lavender was proven versatile and effective.

Lavender is native to the Mediterranean region, famously in Provence, France. Its name comes from the Latin verb "*lavare*", which means "to wash". It is not a surprise, then, that the Greeks and Romans used lavender to scent soaps and bathwater. People who washed laundry were known as "*lavenders*" for a time. The Greeks often referred to the herb as "*nardus*" or "*nard*", after the Syrian city of Naardo. It was sold as a curative for insomnia, backaches, and insanity. Lavender is named as "*spikenard*" in the *Holy Bible* (The Gospel of Luke), in which its oil was used for anointment as a component of the Holy Essence.

The Romans were gracious enough to introduce lavender to the British Isles, alongside war and conquest. The dried, ground heads of the flowers were used as condiments. Meat was rare and difficult to keep fresh; lavender hid the flavors of partially-rotted food. Lavender evolved in time from a meat preserver to a traditional component of an English garden.

Along the way, lavender played several important roles in Europe during the Middle Ages. It was applied as an aphrodisiac but also to ensure chastity. Sprigs were strewn in homes and other buildings. Spikes were hung on walls and over hearths. Sachets freshened rooms and protected linens from moths. Lavender infusions flavored and scented waters. The oil was known to repel flies. During the Great Plague of London in the 17th Century, people wore sprigs of lavender or wore gloves imbued with oil to ward off sickness. The insect-repellant properties of the oil also protected against the fleas that spread the plague and likely prevented some disease.

During the 18th through 20th Centuries, lavender provided treatments for various conditions: hysteria, palpitations, hoarseness, palsy, toothaches, sore joints, apoplexy, and colic. It was also used as a carminative, antispasmodic, stimulant, and smelling salt additive. During World War I, it was a go-to disinfectant.

Queen Victoria popularized lavender in England, insisting on having fresh-cut sprigs every day. Later, the Shakers, a sect of the Quakers, or Friends' Church, were the first people to grow lavender commercially in North America.

Lavender is now cultivated and used around the world for culinary, medicinal, herbal, decorative, and aromatic purposes.

Lavender Oat Cookies

Makes approx. 12 cookies

1/3 cup unsalted butter, plus extra for greasing
2/3 cup flour
¾ tsp baking powder
pinch of salt
1 cup rolled oats
1/3 cup sugar
1 tbsp agave syrup or honey
1 tbsp milk
1 tsp lavender leaves, removed from stem and chopped finely
1 tsp lavender flowers, removed from the flower spike and left whole
1 tsp lime zest

Preheat the oven: 350 degrees.

Grease a baking sheet with butter. Line sheet with baking parchment.

Sift the flour, baking powder, and salt into a bowl, add the oats and sugar and mix well. In a small pan, melt the butter over low heat with the agave syrup or honey and milk. Stir until well incorporated. Add the butter mix to the flour, oats, sugar and lavender leaves, mixing well.

Remove from heat and stir in the lavender flowers and lime zest.

Scoop large spoonfuls of the mixture onto the prepared baking sheet and shape into rounds. Place in the oven and bake for 10 to 13 minutes, until golden brown. Remove and let rest for 5 minutes, then lift onto a wire rack to cool.

Recipe adapted from *Jekka's Herb Cookbook* by Jekka McVicar.

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