



Photo: PEC Lavender

Most of us associate lavender with perfume and washing. We are all familiar with it in soaps, bath oils and the recently-fashionable laundry aid, lavender water. Even its name means to wash, derived from the Latin *lavera*. The ancient Romans were great fans of lavender, tossing its flowers into their bath waters. In 16th-century England, freshly-laundered linens were draped over lavender bushes to capture the scent as they dried. Lavender buds were placed in cupboards to perfume the clothes and keep away the bugs, or scattered over floors so they would be crushed underfoot releasing their scent -- an early form of room deodorizer. So François assumed I'd hang his bouquet in my linen closet to fill my sheets with the scent of lavender and ward away any errant moths, as our grandmothers had done. But lavender is much more versatile than that.

A member of the *Lamiaceae* family, which includes mint and its closer cousin rosemary, lavender has at least 39 varieties. The most common

and hardiest of them all is *Lavandula angustifolia*, better known as English lavender. Despite its name, this genus is not English at all, but a native of Africa, India and the Mediterranean region and probably arrived in the British Isles with those bath-loving Romans. A hardy plant with a strong floral scent, it grows well throughout the world in a wide range of climates. However it is in the hills of Provence, France, where the land is chalky and the climate hot and dry, that lavender really excels. As with any plant, location and soil greatly influence the quality and aroma of its flowers, and the lavender from this region has a lower camphor and higher ester content, making it more aromatic than lavenders grown elsewhere.

At the beginning of the 20th century, lavender growing was commercialized and large tracts were planted at altitudes above 700 metres. Many of these fields are now designated with a *cru* status, like wine, making Provencal lavender highly prized. Both the leaves and the flowers

contain aromatic oils, which are distilled like alcohol, in an alembic. A ton of dry lavender passes through the alembic in about 30 minutes, producing between five and 10 kilos of oil. These oils both play an important role in the perfume and soap industries, but scent, soap, potpourris and sachets for the linen closet are just the beginning of lavender's usefulness.

Lavender has long a medicinal and pharmaceutical tradition. So while French glove makers infused their wares with lavender to protect their clients against the plague with very limited success, lavender's antiseptic properties have a sounder scientific base. By the 16th century, lavender oil was a common remedy for burns and applied to soothe skin irritations. Later, during the First World War, the army employed lavender as a disinfectant. A tisane of lavender is often prescribed for a range of complaints from headaches to nervousness, or as a tonic for those who feel weak. It was -- and still is -- believed to relieve neuralgia, in-



somnia and stress, and it remains a popular scent in aromatherapy. While there is scientific evidence to support lavender's therapeutic benefits and its calming effect, I didn't plan to keep my lavender in the medicine cabinet; it went straight into my kitchen to hang beside my other dried herbs.

Flowers believed to have medicinal qualities were often preserved in sugar, so while the first culinary use of lavender is difficult to pin down, it probably dates from the earliest times when the lines between pharmacy and confectionery were blurred. Lavender honey was used to sweeten and flavour desserts. It was during the 13th century, when syrups -- particularly those made with flowers -- became popular, that lavender gained a foothold in the dessert kitchen. Lavender's taste -- slightly floral, lightly sweet with citrus and peppery notes -- matches well with fruit and dairy products. It is often steeped in cream to flavour custards, ice cream or chocolate. As dry lavender retains its perfume, it can flavour sugar simply by contact, like a vanilla bean. Reputed Provençal chef Roger Vergé steeps the flowers in a syrup made with brown sugar. The flowers are removed, left to harden, then ground into a fine powder that he adds to desserts. A flavoured sugar or syrup is a simple way to introduce lavender into a

recipe, and lavender syrups make an excellent base for lemonade or add a touch of the exotic to alcoholic drinks from a whiskey sour to a champagne cocktail. Flowers in cooking have become fashionable again and lavender flowers, fresh or crystallized, garnish cakes and desserts.

However, lavender also has a savoury side when used with discretion. Its flowers can be scattered over a salad, added to marinades, cheese -- especially goat's -- or steeped with vinegar. Or you could introduce it in the form of lavender-infused salt. Lavender is an essential ingredient -- along with dried thyme, savoury, oregano, rosemary and marjoram -- in herbes de Provence, the dried herb seasoning mix common in the cooking of southern France. The strongly aromatic herbs in this blend balance lavender's floral overtones. While lavender can be used fresh in the kitchen, it is more common dried and, as lavender's potency varies greatly with the plant and where it is grown, it requires a delicate touch. You don't want to overwhelm your dish with its floral side, so err on the side of caution, tasting as you go. Too much lavender can add a bitter note to your dish. Aim for a faintly floral undertone, rather than overwhelming perfume and think about balancing it with another strong flavour. And

most importantly, remember, if your lavender is not homegrown, be sure that is edible (or culinary) lavender, grown without sprays or chemicals.

Try growing your own lavender. It is easy, even for those without a green thumb. It is a hardy plant, surviving well in the Canadian garden, and even a small bush will yield enough for culinary experimentation, with some left over for your linen closet.

While you wait for your own lavender plant to mature, you can easily add lavender to your cooking with a visit to Prince Edward County. The area's dry summers and the moderating influence of Lake Ontario result in perfect conditions for lavender. Visit Prince Edward County Lavender, where they grow aromatic English lavender, among other varieties. They make soaps, oils and sachets for your linen closet, and they also specialize in culinary lavender. You can buy dried lavender to use in your kitchen, or salt and sugar already infused with the aroma and flavour of lavender. They even make a local version of herbes de Provence, using the herbs and lavender grown on their farm.

Best of all, you can tour the farm and admire the fields of purple lavender and learn more about its history and use.

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