

# Lavender

By Marie Hildebrandt

Erie County Master Gardener

Looking for a plant to add to the landscape this year that soothes a troubled soul?

This year, when filling in the flower beds with new plants, consider purchasing lavender. A member of the mint family, lavender has had a variety of uses through the centuries and its unmistakable fragrance permeates the air in gardens everywhere.

Historically, it was used to treat depression, insomnia, anxiety and fatigue. Research indicates it has calming, soothing and sedative effects when inhaled.

Lavender is native to the Mediterranean region. Both the ancient Greeks and Romans grew lavender. It is said to have been brought to the British Isles by the Romans, and is thought to have first been brought to the United States by the Pilgrims in the 1600s.

The Romans used it in their bath water, to treat insect bites and to repel insects. It was used during WWI to disinfect floors and walls. In ancient Egypt it was used as a perfume and as an ingredient in incense. It was strewn over floors in castles and sickrooms as a disinfectant, a deodorant, to treat wounds during wartime and to protect linens from moths.

Today, lavender is best known as an ingredient in potpourri and perfume, and for use in cosmetic products. The oil of lavender is said to have a calming effect on people and it helps to induce sleep. It is used in tea, as a seasoning for meat and in baking. It is used in teas, cookies, desserts and sauces. It adds a savory flavor to many meats.

There are at least 100 cultivars of lavender, both hardy and tender perennials. The plants are easy to care for, require full sun and well-drained soil with a pH of 6.4 to 8.2. Once established the plants are drought-tolerant. Lavender is deer and rabbit resistant, is non-aggressive and non-invasive. Known as a subshrub, it is a semi-evergreen with foliage lasting into winter. Environmentally it is an important plant because its nectar attracts bees, butterflies, lady bugs and praying mantis. Bees produce the highest quality of honey when using the nectar from lavender.

The most common type of lavender is English lavender. It is easily grown in Hardiness Zone 6. It is semi-woody and grows up to two feet across. Older branches turn woody over the years. The gray to green leaves are about two inches long. Depending on the type of lavender, the flowers can be purple, lavender, pink or white.

When considering the type of lavender to grow, experts rate the English lavenders in the following order: Imperial Gem, Royal Velvet, Munstead, Super Blue, Jean Davis, Niko, and Sharon Roberts.

English lavenders range in size from six to 46 inches high. All are less prone to invasion by pests than other herbs and plants diseases are minimal. (They include fungal root rot from over watering, fungal and bacterial leaf spotting, stem blight and wilt.) Lavender is an ideal low maintenance plant. Shear plants by one-third after blooming to remove spent flower stalks. Only move the plants in the spring and if buying new ones, it is best to buy for spring planting.