



GROWING & KNOWING
LAVENDER

WRITTEN BY JOHN MASON

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1 DIVERSITY AND CLASSIFICATION	8
The lavender family.....	9
<i>Lavandula angustifolia</i> syn. <i>L.vera</i> , <i>L.spica</i> , <i>L.officinalis</i> (English lavender).....	11
<i>Lavandula stoechas</i> ssp. <i>stoechas</i> (Spanish/Italian lavender).....	11
<i>Lavandula stoechas</i> ssp. <i>stoechas</i> ‘Alba’.....	11
<i>Lavandula stoechas</i> ssp. <i>pendunculata</i> - syn. <i>L. stoechas</i> ssp. <i>canariensis</i>	11
<i>Lavandula viridis</i>	11
<i>Lavandula dentata</i> var. <i>candicans</i>	11
<i>Lavandula canariensis</i>	12
<i>Lavandula pubescens</i>	12
<i>Lavandula abrotanoides</i>	12
<i>Lavandula bipinnata</i>	12
<i>Lavandula gibsonii</i>	12
<i>Lavandula subnuda</i>	12
<i>Lavandula macra</i>	12
<i>Lavandula aristibracteata</i>	12
Tim Upson’s Classification.....	13
<i>Lavandula angustifolia</i>	13
<i>Lavandula lanata</i>	13
<i>Lavandula latifolia</i>	13
<i>Lavandula dentata</i> var. <i>dentata</i>	13
<i>Lavandula dentata</i> var. <i>candicans</i>	13
<i>Lavandula stoechas</i> subsp. <i>stoechas</i>	13
<i>Lavandula stoechas</i> subsp. <i>pedunculata</i>	13
<i>Lavandula stoechas</i> subsp. <i>sampaiana</i>	13
<i>Lavandula stoechas</i> subsp. <i>lusitanica</i>	13
<i>Lavandula stoechas</i> subsp. <i>luisieri</i>	13
<i>Lavandula stoechas</i> subsp. <i>atlantica</i>	13
<i>Lavandula stoechas</i> subsp. <i>maderensis</i>	13
<i>Lavandula stoechas</i> subsp. <i>cariensis</i>	13
<i>Lavandula viridis</i>	13

Lavandula multifida.....	13
Lavandula canariensis.....	13
Lavandula pinnata.....	13
Lavandula buchii.....	13
Lavandula minutolii.....	13
Lavandula maroccana.....	13
Lavandula tenuisecta.....	13
Lavandula mairei.....	13
Lavandula antineae.....	13
Lavandula coronopifolia (syn. L. stricta).....	13
Lavandula pubescens.....	13
Lavandula citriodora.....	13
Lavandula subnuda.....	13
Lavandula macra.....	13
Lavandula dhofarensis.....	13
Lavandula setifera.....	13
Lavandula nimmoi.....	13
Lavandula galgalloensis.....	13
Lavandula aristibracteata.....	13
Lavandula somaliensis.....	13
Lavandula gibsonii.....	13
Lavandula bipinnate.....	13
Lavandula basikensis.....	13
Lavandula atriplicifolia.....	13
Lavandula erythrae.....	13
McNaughton's Classification.....	14

CHAPTER 2 GROWING LAVENDER..... 16

Growing conditions.....	16
Cultural controls.....	19
Considering flower quality and quantity.....	21
Propagation.....	22
Buying lavender plants.....	26
Summary for lavender.....	26

CHAPTER 3 LAVENDER SPECIES 27

Lavandula abrotanoides	27
Lavandula alba	27
Lavandula angustifolia	27
Lavandula aristibracteata	29
Lavandula bipinnata	29
Lavandula buchii	29
Lavandula canariensis	30
Lavandula chaytoriae	31
Lavandula coronopifolia	32
Lavandula delphinensis	32
Lavandula dentata	32
Lavandula gibsonii	35
Lavandula x intermedia	35
Lavandula lanata	35
Lavandula latifolia	36
Lavandula maroccana	36
Lavandula minutolii	37
Lavandula multifida	37
Lavandula nana	38
Lavandula officinalis	38
Lavandula pedemontan	38
Lavandula pedunculata	38
Lavandula pinnata	38
Lavandula praecox	40
Lavandula pubescens	40
Lavandula pyrenaica	40
Lavandula rotundifolia	40
Lavandula serrata	40
Lavandula spica	40
Lavandula stoechas	41
Lavandula subnuda	42
Lavandula viridis	42

CHAPTER 4 CULTIVARS

43

Lavandula angustifolia cultivars	43
Lavandula angustifolia 'Arctic Snow'	43
Lavandula angustifolia 'Ashdown Forest'	44
Lavandula angustifolia 'Backhouse Purple'	45
Lavandula angustifolia 'Betty's Blue'	46
Lavandula angustifolia 'Blue Ice'	47
Lavandula angustifolia 'Cedar Blue'	48
Lavandula angustifolia 'Clarmo'	49
Lavandula angustifolia 'Foveaux Storm'	50
Lavandula angustifolia 'Hidcote'	51
Lavandula angustifolia 'Hidcote Pink'	52
Lavandula angustifolia 'Imperial Gem'	53
Lavandula angustifolia 'Lady Ann'	55
Lavandula angustifolia 'Lady Laverna'	56
Lavandula angustifolia 'Melissa Lilac'	58
Lavandula angustifolia 'Miss Dawnderry'	59
Lavandula angustifolia 'Miss Katherine'	60
Lavandula angustifolia 'Munstead'	61
Lavandula angustifolia 'Nana Atropurpurea'	63
Lavandula angustifolia 'Peter Pan'	64
Lavandula angustifolia 'Princess Blue'	65
Lavandula angustifolia 'Rosea'	66
Lavandula stoechas cultivars	67
Lavandula stoechas 'Avonview'	67
Lavandula stoechas 'Ballerina'	68
Lavandula stoechas ssp. pedunculata 'Butterfly'	69
Lavandula stoechas 'Bella Purple'	70
Lavandula stoechas 'Devonshire Compact'	71
Lavandula stoechas subsp. stoechas f. rosea 'Kew Red'	72
Lavandula stoechas 'Madrid Purple'	73
Lavandula stoechas ssp. lusitanica 'Lusi Pink'	74
Lavandula stoechas 'Marshwood'	75
Lavandula stoechas ssp. pedunculata 'Pukehou'	76

Lavandula ‘Willowbridge Calico’	77
Lavandula stoechas ‘With Love’	78
Lavandula X Intermedia Cultivars (Lavandins).....	79
Lavandula x ‘Christiana’	79
Lavandula x intermedia ‘Grosso’.....	81
Lavandula x intermedia ‘Edelweiss’.....	85
Lavandula x intermedia ‘Gros Bleu’.....	86
Lavandula x intermedia ‘Heavenly Scent’.....	87
Lavandula x intermedia ‘Provence’.....	89
Lavandula x intermedia ‘Sussex’.....	90
Lavandula x intermedia ‘Walberton’s Silver Edge’ = ‘Walvera’.....	91

CHAPTER 5 USING LAVENDER **92**

Lavender oil	92
Lavender crafts.....	94
Culinary use.....	96
Medicinal uses.....	99
Cosmetics.....	100
Cleaning.....	101
Landscaping with lavender.....	102

CHAPTER 6 LAVENDER BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES **109**

Types of Lavender products.....	112
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APPENDIX **114**

Distance learning and online courses.....	113
E-books by John Mason and ACS Staff include.....	115
Printed books by John Mason	116
Useful contacts.....	117
ACS global partners.....	117
Social media.....	117

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CHAPTER 1 DIVERSITY AND CLASSIFICATION

Lavender is perhaps one of the most popular herbs grown worldwide. Thousands of acres of lavender are grown commercially, particularly in Europe, for lavender oil which is mainly used in cosmetics and soaps. The plants are ideal for hedges, garden shrubs and topiary. Dried flowers are used in potpourri, sachets, and other crafts. Dried flowers are also sometimes used in cooking (e.g. to flavour bread or biscuits).



Lavender growing at Parc de Floral, Nice, France

Lavenders require a well-drained soil and plenty of sunlight. They prefer lighter soils, however will adapt to most soil types. Lavenders are usually propagated by cuttings.

Lavender can be easy to grow in the right climate; but achieving a high quality lavender crop, may be far more involved. There are many different types of lavenders; and they do vary in their cultural requirements and their ability to produce flowers (both quality and quantity).

The Lavender Family

Lavender belongs to the mint family, along with rosemary and thyme. The scientific name of this family was Labiatae but is now more commonly listed as Lamiaceae. You may find either name used in references you encounter.

The Lamiaceae family contains about 180 different genera with more than 3,500 species of mainly herbs and shrubs. They are found throughout the world, with the majority in the Mediterranean region. The family is characterised by having stems that are squarish in cross section. The flowers of lavenders are very difficult to describe precisely. The following description attempts to draw together some of the more usual characteristics. "The flowers are irregular and appear in cymes in the axils of opposite bracts or leaves which form false whorls arranged in a simple or compound inflorescence."

This tells us that the flowers emerge from where the leaves join the stems and are borne in clusters of many flowers (cymes). These flower heads are usually referred to as spikes. They may be arranged in whorl-like clusters (arising from one point) or singly. The individual flowers within each inflorescence also have some notable characteristics. The calyx (outermost part where the sepals are fused to form

a tube) has 4-5 lobes or is 2-lipped. The corolla (innermost part comprising of the fused petals) is 4-6 lobed and usually 2-lipped. The upper lip is 2-lobed and the lower lip is 3-lobed, with the lobes being ovate in shape and equal sized. The corolla is blue, violet or purple, rarely white or pink, and the tube is longer than the calyx.

The male flower parts consist of 4 stamens in two pairs with often just 2 fertile anthers. The female parts consist of a superior ovary with two deeply lobed carpels, a single style from a central depression of lobes, and a stigma which is almost 2-lobed.

The fruits are 4 glabrous (hairless), one-seeded nutlets. Many of the species in this family are widely grown as ornamentals or as herbs for both medicinal and culinary purposes.

Other commonly grown genera in the family are *Ajuga*, *Coleus*, *Hemiandra*, *Hyssopus* (Hyssop), *Melissa* (Balms), *Monarda*, *Ocimum* (Basils), *Origanum* (Oregano, Marjoram), *Phlomis*, *Plectranthus*, *Prostanthera*, *Rosmarinus* (Rosemary), *Stachys*, *Teucrium*, *Thymus* (Thyme) and *Westringia*.

The genus *Lavandula* has leaves that are simple with no stipules (basal appendages). They are entire or dissected, opposite and scented.



A multitude of different cultivars on display at Hampton Court Flower Show in July 2013. As always, lavenders draw a huge amount of interest.

Classification



Lavenders attract insects

The common name is lavender (spelled with “e”), and the scientific (genus) name is *Lavandula* (spelled with an “a”). The genus consists of small shrubs and herbs which are native to a widespread region including Mediterranean countries, the Middle East, India, North Africa, the Canary Islands and the Cape Verde Islands.

The classification of lavender can be confusing to many people. Listing the species is difficult as they have frequently crossed with each other in the wild and their common names differ from country to country. Even the botanists don’t always agree on classification of lavenders; and “scientific” classification by taxonomic bodies is often updated. You may well read two very authoritative accounts, published ten years apart, which could present very different ways

of classifying some lavender.

At the end of the day, it is important to not be too rigid and pedantic in how you approach plant naming. See it for what it is: a tool for understanding differences between the different types of lavender that we grow, but also a system devised by man, and having all the imperfections that man has.

Twenty to Forty Species

Experts vary how many species of *Lavandula* exist. Some authorities suggest around 20 species and others as many as 40 species. A number of authorities agree on around 28 as the number of species.

There are also hundreds, if not thousands of varieties (genotypes).

In an attempt to describe the different species, the genus is commonly divided into subgroups in different ways by different authorities, for example:

Hardy and Tender Species

There are seven subgroups as follows:

- English lavenders – have slender flower spikes
- Spanish lavenders (*Stoechas*) – have fatter flower spikes and a tuft of purple bracts atop each flower spike
- *Pterostoechas* – have pinnate divided leaves (small leaflets are arranged opposite one another on a central stalk)
- French lavenders (*Dentata*)