

Lavandula

Labiatae

[*Lamiaceae*]

Lavandula is derived from Latin *lavo* (wash, bathe) with reference to the use of lavender in perfumes and soaps.

Both the ancient Greeks and the Romans (the Libyans too) are believed to have used French lavender (*Lavandula stoechas*) to scent and disinfect bathwater. Some believe this may explain its name as Lavender is said to be derived from the Latin word *lavandus* meaning ‘to be washed’. The Greeks christened the plant *nardos* (after Naarda, a Syrian city) and this became corrupted to *nard*.

It was popular as a strewing herb all over Europe and has been used to scent linen there for hundreds of years. Although it is likely that the Romans introduced lavender to Britain records confirming this do not appear to be clear but it can be deduced that the plant had been introduced there by the Middle Ages. Across the Channel lavender was increasing in popularity in France when Charles VI (1368-1422) who reigned from 1380-1422, required the palace cushions to be filled with the flowers, not only to create a pleasant smell but also to repel insects, especially moths.

Back in England from the end of the 15th Century it was a familiar sight growing in Tudor knot gardens when its culinary and medicinal properties were much in demand. Its popularity about 200 years later seems to have been little changed and Queen Henrietta Maria (1609-1669), consort of Charles I who ruled Britain from 1625-49, is said to have had lavender growing in her garden.

Britain became renowned for her lavender fields which were centred on Mitcham in Surrey and had become well established there by the 13th Century. Unfortunately though its commercial growth in the Country has now dwindled to some fields in Norfolk (that are said to grow a particularly sweet smelling variety). These compete with the main European suppliers in Italy and France – and the latter in Provence have acquired a modern name for cultivating lavender with the finest aroma. It is from these plants especially that oils are extracted for aromatherapy.

Although in the West lavender tends to be thought of first as a perfume its essential oil can offer a culinary flavouring and the leaves and flowers of *Lavandula angustifolia* can be included as an ingredient in salads, ice creams and jellies, as well as in vinegar and soft drinks. The crystallised flowers and dried leaves are also used as an edible decoration and honey from hives with bees that visit lavender fields is held to have an especially good flavour.

On the subject of superstition lavender is not entirely lacking. It was once thought to provide the favourite habitat for asps and this meant that lavender bushes would be approached with considerable caution. It was said that thriving lavender in the garden meant that the daughter of the household would never marry. Then as symbolism a gift of lavender was a sign of affection between lovers – and to dream of lavender was/is said to indicate a reunion.

The famous English dramatist, William Shakespeare (1564-1616), refers to lavender in his play *The Winter's Tale*

.....Here's flowers for you;

Hot lavender, mints, savory, marjoram;
and Izaak Walton (1593-1683), who was the son of an ale-house keeper and is especially remembered for his descriptions of country life in *The Compleat Angler*, or the *Contemplative Man's Recreation*, wrote

..... an honest ale-house, where we shall find a cleanly room,
lavender in the windows, and twenty ballads stuck against the wall,
and my hostess, I may tell you, is both cleanly and handsome and
civil.

Lavender is recognized as an insect repellent and a drop of essence rubbed into the skin can prove effective in repelling moths, flies and mosquitoes. It is understood that in the early 20th Century there were creditable authorities who claimed that lions and tigers in the Zoo in Regent's Park in London were also affected by the scent of lavender. Under its influence they claimed that animals would become docile.

Lavender's medicinal qualities have long been known and appreciated. When it was rumoured that the glovers in Grasse (north of Antibes in southern France), who perfumed their leather with lavender oil, seemed to be avoiding the worst of a plague epidemic it became fashionable for people to carry the flower. Lavender has long had the reputation for being an anaphrodisiac – and an old remedy for maintaining chastity was to sprinkle one's head with it. Distilled flower water was also recommended by herbalists as a vocal restorative, a calming agent, a remedy for faintness and a treatment for loss of appetite. Lavender was used externally too (and still is sometimes today) to ease toothache, headache, neuralgia, sprains and rheumatism.

Authorities consider that *Lavandula angustifolia* and *Lavandula stoechas* provide the finest quality oil, a medium quality is obtained from *Lavandula intermedia*, and 'spike' oil (which is used in cheaper products) comes from *Lavandula latifolia*.