

- Suggested story concept
- Sourced garden photography
- Designed and produced models for photography (and grew the lavender)
- Researched and wrote story and instructions



Purple Haze

Lovely lavender: it blooms despite lazy gardeners, little rain and poor soil, and has a heavenly fragrance that has been prized throughout history.

BY JO CALVERT

Hardy noninvasive perennials, lavenders suit both informal and formal gardens. Mature lavenders form dense mounds of foliage, ranging from grey to green and from 30 to 60 centimetres tall – beautiful even when they're not blooming. And lavender's not just blue – you can choose a plant that flowers in white, pink or pale purple through to inky, intense blue or violet.

In a flowerbed, the blooming plants provide a cloud of hazy colour that softens the contours of leggy companions such as roses. Planted in a row, compact varieties form a low hedge to edge a bed or path, or trace the outline of a traditional knot garden filled with other herbs.

Perhaps the best part? Once you plant lavender, you can enjoy its fragrance – and its flavour – long after summer is gone.



Although it's not native to Canada, disease-resistant lavender is a good green choice, as well. Its easy-care attributes mean that it doesn't want any chemical help to grow and, once established, requires almost no watering. Its nectar-rich flowers attract butterflies, bees and other beneficial pollinators to the garden – more important than ever, now that these are being threatened worldwide.



How to grow it

Given a sunny, well-drained site, lavenders will thrive in dry, poor soil and even self-seed. An annual top dressing of compost and occasional watering during very dry spells is welcome, but avoid overfeeding with high-nitrogen fertilizers or rich manures. Follow the spacing recommendations on the plant tag (some lavenders spread up to 1 metre in diameter) when planting in a flowerbed, but shave off about a third of that when planting a row for a hedge. This is a good time to add new lavender to the garden; planting is recommended no later than two months before the first hard frost, to let plants get settled in.

Compact varieties grow happily in containers, but require a coarse potting mix that doesn't stay soggy, and you will need to water, sparingly, in the summer. In the fall, protect the roots from freezing by sinking the pot in a

flowerbed for the winter or moving the potted plant into your garage until spring, then replot in fresh soil.

Harvest some or all of the flowers, if you like, or leave them all summer long. Either way, shear back lavenders by about one-third (avoid cutting into older, woody stems) each fall, leaving a compact cushion of leafy stems.

Three to try

- 'Pink Perfume' forms a mound of grey green foliage that produces pink flowers from July until the first frost.
- 'Hidcote Blue' forms compact plants with green foliage and deep blue-purple blooms that flower from June to August.
- 'Potpourri' white lavender forms a bushy plant of green foliage, with white blooms from June to September.

All three are hardy to zone 5; purchase plants at your local nursery, or find seeds and germinating tips at Veseys (www.veseys.com).





How to dry it – and enjoy it

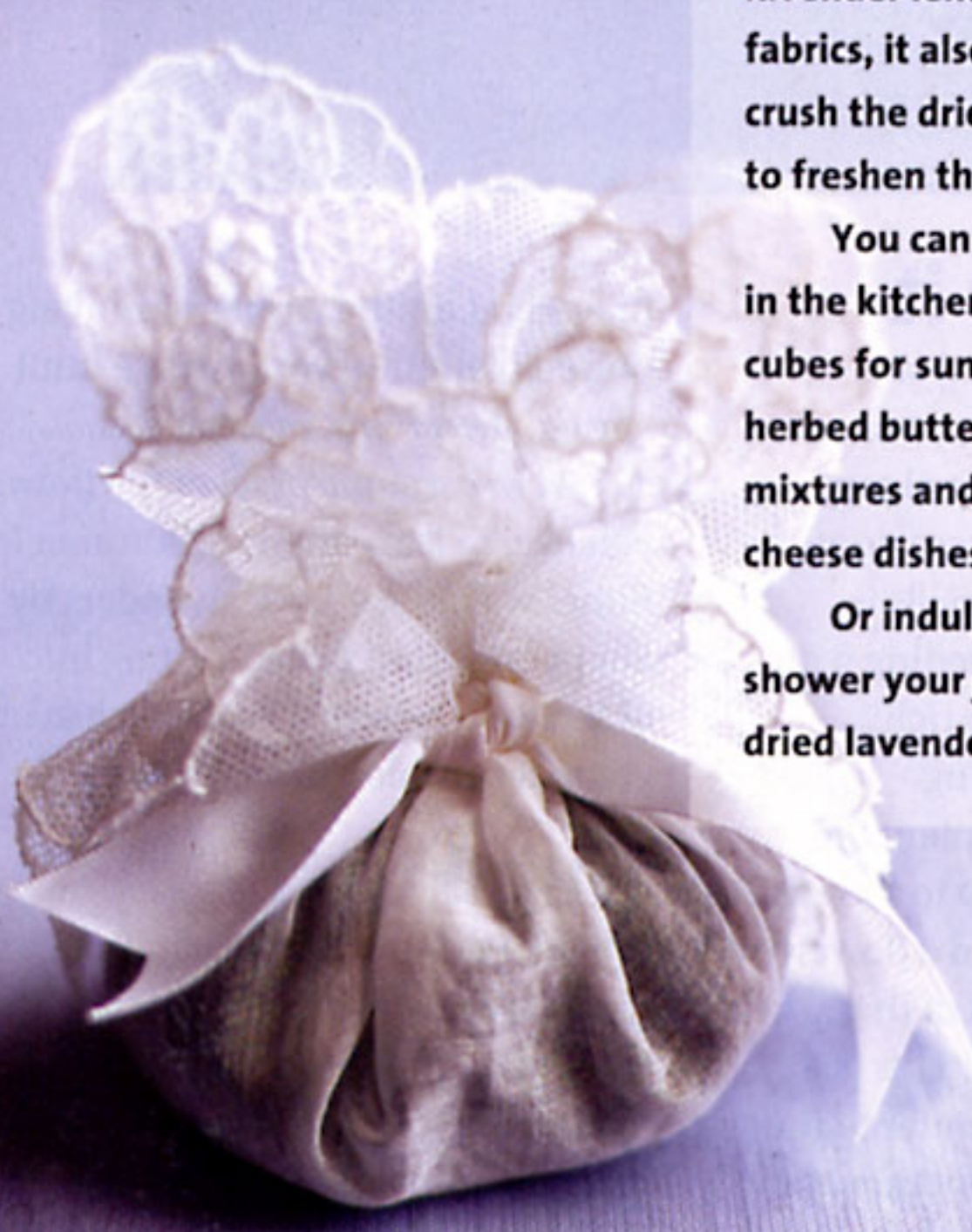
Harvest flower spikes just when the first few flowers are opening on each. Cut stems in the soft new growth, in the morning after the dew has dried and before the sun gets too hot. Gather into small bunches, and tie each near cut ends (or secure with elastic band), then hang upside down in dark, dry, airy, dust-free room.

When thoroughly dry, gently rub down each stem to remove flowers.

Store dried flowers in an airtight jar to sprinkle into bathwater, or tie a handful into a pretty hanky to make an “instant” sachet for a linen cupboard or drawer (while the lavender lends its fragrance to the fabrics, it also deters moths). Slightly crush the dried flowers every so often to freshen their scent.

You can also use the dried flowers in the kitchen. Freeze them in ice cubes for summer drinks, and add to herbed butters, sweet desserts, tea mixtures and savoury meat and cheese dishes.

Or indulge in a recent trend and shower your just-married friends with dried lavender, instead of confetti.



PURPLE PROSE AND POETRY

- Learn more about gardening with lavender in *Lavender: The Grower's Guide* (Timber, 2000, \$33.95) by Virginia McNaughton.
- Learn more about cooking with lavender in *The Lavender Cookbook* (Perseus Books Group, 2004, \$21.50) by Sharon Shipley.
- Introduce your children to “Lavender’s Blue” and other classic nursery rhymes with the facsimile edition of the beloved and beautifully illustrated 1950s classic, *Lavender’s Blue* (Oxford University Press, 2007, \$21.95).