



**LEFT** Jacky visits the lavender fields at Castle Farm in Kent, where cut bunches of lavender are 'spiked' onto a metal pole and taken by tractor to the drying kilns at the farm. **BELOW LEFT** Lavender honey can be bought at The Hop Shop. **RIGHT** *Lavandula angustifolia* 'Folgate'; occasionally a pale pink stem will appear amid a sea of blue. **OPPOSITE PAGE** From early July, depending on the weather, the lavender is harvested for drying.



# Lavender

Pretty as a Provençal picture, this purple herb is more than just a border plant. Its scent, flavour and colour makes it perfect for the kitchen too

**PHOTOGRAPHS** MICHELLE GARRETT **WORDS** JACKY HOBBS

**T**here's one plant you absolutely must have in your kitchen garden: lavender. It looks beautiful flowering away outdoors, but it can also be hand picked and dried to perfume indoor vases, make table decorations, wreaths, lavender bags or sleep pillows. But it's not just decorative; lavender works hard in the garden, attracting all-important pollinating bees and other insects essential to a successful vegetable plot. Lavender honey is a bonus by-product.

On top of all this, the lavender flowers themselves are actually edible. Tasting more or less like they smell, they can be mixed into breads, cakes, jellies and jams; or crushed with other spicy herbs to create delicious herbal crusts for meats; soaked in honeys and oils to marinate fish and fowl; or simply used to garnish salads and desserts.

A Mediterranean native, the purple-flowering herb needs a free-draining, sunny site with neutral to alkaline soil. If your soil conditions are too acidic or too heavy, or cold and wet, then plant lavender in pots filled with a free-draining compost and place in a sunny, sheltered position. (You can also improve garden soil drainage by incorporating gravel or small stones and by planting lavender on a slight mound.) Pots are also perfect for tender but longer-flowering varieties such as *Lavandula canariensis* and *L. dentata*, and the more unusual green-flowered *L. viridis*, which has a distinctive eucalyptus aroma.

Once you have established your favourite lavenders, you can bulk up your plants by taking cuttings. In springtime, you can make softwood cuttings from non-flowering stems; or in early autumn, try semi-hardwood cuttings. If growing as a hedge, plant 35-45cms apart, watering young ▶



Expert advice

**CAROLINE ALEXANDER OF CASTLE FARM GROWS 90 MILES OF LAVENDER AND LAVANDIN. SHE SAYS:**

'While some of our lavender is cut and dried, the majority is distilled to produce pure essential oils. Lavender oil is used for aromatherapy, pharmaceuticals, high-grade toiletries and perfumes; while lavandin is used for candles, room scents, soaps and insect repellents. If you are starting out, choose a dark blue *Lavandula angustifolia* - it is the best variety to grow for aesthetics and home culinary use. The deep blue flower heads hang onto their colour for ages, making them a great candidate for drying, and they are also sweet-flavoured for cooking. There is no harm in using what you currently have growing in the garden, but the 'butterfly' *Lavandula stoechas* types are not appropriate, and the larger-growing *Lavandula intermedia* may be a little bitter in taste.'



**ABOVE** Beehives on the perimeters of the expansive lavender fields at Castle Farm. **The bees produce delicious lavender-flavoured honey in season. BELOW LEFT** Lavender grower Caroline Alexander. **OPPOSITE, FROM TOP LEFT** Roast beef with a lavender and coriander crust; crushed dried lavender flower heads, with coriander seeds and salt to make a crust for the beef; a lemon and lavender loaf cake.

plants well to help get their roots established. Water only when essential thereafter, especially if in pots or containers. To ensure healthy, long-living plants and for optimum flower crops, Caroline Alexander of Castle Farm recommends cutting the plants back in late summer or early autumn - pruning to leave only 2-3cm of the current year's growth. This promotes bushier plants with lots of flowering shoots for the following year. Lavender left unpruned has a shorter life span. It becomes leggy and woody with fewer flowers and tends to die back.

If using the heads for cooking, pick stems when they are in full flower with their best colour. Bunch them and hang upside down to dry in a warm dry location, such as over a range oven or in an airing cupboard. Once dried, the flower heads can be rubbed off by rolling the stems between your palms. Collect in a basin or paper bag. They must stay dry; to retain flavour and colour they are best stored in a container away from the light. They can be used directly in cooking, sprinkled in or on a shortbread mixture, scattered prettily through marmalades and jellies, or for infusing and flavouring sugars, salt and vinegar.

Alternatively, they can be ground with other herbs or olive oil to extract more flavour, and used with meats or in sauces. They can also be used to blend with tea. Caroline sells specialist teas incorporating her lavender such as 'Lavender Grey' and 'Sleepy Tea'.

Lavender events & products

● **Castle Farm holds a Lavender Festival** annually, usually on the first two weekends in July (2/3 and 9/10 July in 2011) with tours of the fields and the specialist oil distillation unit. Enjoy a relaxing lavender massage (pre-booking essential), and visit the shop (voted 'Best Farm Shop' in the *Kent Life* Food and Drink Awards). It's open all year for lavender everything including plants, essences, ice cream, tea, cakes, fudge, toiletries, wreaths and tea towels as well as local foods, farm beef and apple juice.

● **Capture a purer, more consistent flavour** with specialist culinary lavender essences, which can be ordered online at £4.75 each plus p&p. Formulated from lavender oil, there is one for high temperature cooking, including baking and preserving; and another for drinks and cold foods such as ice-cream and cheesecakes. **The Hop Shop, Castle Farm, Shoreham, Sevenoaks, Kent TN14 7UB. Tel: +44 (0)1959 523219. www.hopshop.co.uk**

Recipe 1  
Roast beef with a lavender and coriander crust

This recipe brings a great summer twist to roast topside of beef, which can be served traditionally hot or cold - perfect for a summer buffet or Sunday lunch. The lavender flowers will keep over winter if properly stored. This dish can be served on a bed of fresh lavender stems, as demonstrated by Crispin at Castle Farm (*far left*), but the more parsimonious may prefer to use only a sprig or two.

- **Take two teaspoons of coriander seed** and crush with two teaspoons of lavender flower heads (*dried as described opposite*).
- **Mix with two tablespoons honey** (preferably lavender) with pepper and salt to taste. Rub it into the top of the beef, then roast the beef as usual.



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Recipe 2  
Lemon & lavender loaf cake

- Ingredients:  
125g butter -175g caster sugar - 175g self raising flour - 1-2 tablespoons dried lavender - 2 eggs - 4 tablespoons milk - 1 lemon - 100g icing sugar
- **Preheat the oven** to 180°C, and butter and flour a large loaf tin.
  - **Cream butter and sugar** together before adding the eggs and the grated zest of the lemon (keep the lemon). Quickly but gently fold in the flour and lavender before loosening the mixture with milk.
  - **Spoon into the prepared tin** and pop in the oven for 30-40 minutes, until springy and golden.
  - **On the hob, gently melt** the icing sugar into the lemon's squeezed juice.
  - **Remove the loaf from the oven** and spike repeatedly with a skewer, before pouring over the lemon syrup. Leave to cool and decorate with sprigs of lavender.

