

IN THE GARDEN

## Provence in a Plant: Just Inhale



Jane Therese for The New York Times

**A SNIFF, A SIGH** Hidcote lavender, an English variety with a strong scent and gray-green leaves. Its flowers are good for cooking and drying.

---

By **ANNE RAVER**

Published: June 26, 2008

**AN herb that smells as good as lavender simply has to be grown, even though it's not a native plant. I feel a little guilty saying this, because lately I have been so vigilant about planting natives, to feed the insects and birds that evolved with them. But lavender, which hails from the Mediterranean — as do oregano, bay, thyme, rosemary and so many other herbs — is one of those fragrant plants that settle in your soul.**



Jane Therese for The New York Times

Well-Sweep Herb Farm in Port Murray, N.J., has 75 varieties of lavender.

**It happened to me about two weeks ago, as I stood knee-deep in a two-acre field of lavender, stroking the gray-green leaves and airy stems to release those volatile oils that clear the head. I breathed deep, looking out over the expanse of blues and violets and thought, well, if I can't get to the lavender fields of Provence, in France, Willow Pond Farm in Fairfield, Pa., will do just fine.**

The owners, Tom and Madeline Wajda (pronounced VIE-da) grow more than 60 different lavenders and many other herbs, all organically, on this 32-acre farmstead, where they founded the Pennsylvania Lavender Festival seven years ago (717-642-6387; [willowpondherbs.com](http://willowpondherbs.com)). The festival is held every Father's Day weekend, just as the lavenders begin to bloom.

Another mecca for lavender, Well-Sweep Herb Farm, in Port Murray, N.J., will hold its lavender festival on July 12 (908-852-5390; [wellsweep.com](http://wellsweep.com)). Owned by Cyrus and Louise Hyde, the farm offers more than 1,900 herbs and perennials, including 75 kinds of lavender.

Both farms display their lavenders in gardens where one can easily see the plants that complement those quiet grays and greens and blues: bright yellow campanula; the dark blue-green leaves of spiny acanthus; or, for a show-stopping contrast, Kniphofia, the tall orange and yellow lilies my grandmother called red-hot poker.

I spent a few hours at Well-Sweep last week, touching and sniffing the plants in the formal herb garden, with its brick paths and citrus and bay trees. I wandered up and down a long, wide lavender bed backed by a low stone wall, trying to decide which plants I liked best, for fragrance and form, as well as subtle differences in color.

Hidcote, a dark purple, strongly scented variety with gray-green leaves, had stood out at Willow Pond Farm. Like Munstead, which has lilac-colored flowers, it's one of the tried-and-true English lavenders (*Lavandula angustifolia*) that are the most aromatic and the best for cooking and drying.

I noticed Hidcote right away at Well-Sweep, too, where I was drawn to its robust, mounded habit and perfect florets, which open in clusters halfway up the airy stems. It also looked great massed in a hedge, where its cloud of purple flowers was a handsome foil for a little sea of acanthus and bright, orange-flowered calendula.

Other lavenders that struck my eye were Graves lavender, which has tall stems with blue flowers; Cedar Blue, which is thick and bushy; Croxton's Wild, which has pale violet flowers; and Ashdown Forest, a compact variety whose pale green buds promise light blue flowers.

I used the catalog as my guide walking along the lavender bed, noting that all of my favorites were "consistently reliable here at the farm," and that a few, like Sharon Roberts, a dark blue, and Rebecca Kay, a dark purple, would bloom again reliably and enthusiastically in late summer if the spent flowers from the first bloom were removed.

One of the farm's most striking plantings bordered either side of the long walkway to the historic (and entirely functional) two-seater outhouse. The brick path was flanked by velvety lamb's ears, whose silvery leaves reflect light, especially when the moon is out.

"People planted lamb's ears to light up the path at night," Mrs. Hyde told me, as she readied some plants for sale by her potting shed.

In addition to its lavenders, Well-Sweep grows 37 kinds of basil, 54 rosemarys, 108 thymes and 72 scented geraniums, so if you garden with your nose, plan on spending a good afternoon there.

Interestingly, both growers give their lavenders plenty of nitrogen, even though herbs are often said to like lean soil. At Willow Pond, Mr. Wajda reported that his lavenders had just about doubled in size after being given a good dose of corn gluten, which is high in nitrogen.

At Well-Sweep, gardeners dig in plenty of aged chicken manure, from Mr. Hyde's Onagadori chickens. The idea that herbs need lean soil is related to "an old-fashioned myth that the oils are stronger if you starve a plant," Mrs. Hyde said. "That's probably true because the plant is fighting to keep going, but we feed our soil, which feeds our plants."

Well-Sweep's gardeners space the plants, which double in size every year, two to three feet apart for good air circulation.

"We water them well when we put them in," Mrs. Hyde said. "But we don't water after that. We don't have time."

Lavenders are quite drought-tolerant, once established. At Well-Sweep, gardeners put down hardwood mulch in the formal gardens and coarser woodchips in the perennial beds to preserve moisture and eventually add compost to the soil.

The Wajdas, however, advise against using wood mulch. "It's not good for lavenders," Mr. Wajda said. "It holds moisture and adds to soil acidity." And that can lead to fungus problems, Mrs. Wajda said.

Mr. Wajda grows his lavender in raised beds, which allows water to drain quickly from roots.

"Mound the soil a bit if you have heavy clay," he said. "Use sand as a mulch, about an inch deep, a foot around the plant." That will bring heat to the plants and cut down on fungal diseases. He waters his young lavender plants once a week during the first season. After that, he said, he never waters.

Both growers stressed the absolute basics: lavender needs good drainage and sweet soil, which means adding lime and plenty of compost to clay-based soils.

"Most soils around here have a pH of 6.3 or so, and lavender likes a pH of 7 to 7.5," Mr. Wajda said, referring to the measure of alkalinity (7 is neutral).

Lavender is a forgiving plant with high rewards if you just do a few things right. And it's comforting to hear two veteran growers disagree on something as basic as mulch, and to see that their lavenders are blooming beautifully either way.

## **Mix Well, Add Herbs: A Recipe for Growing Lavender**

TINA MARIE WILCOX, who runs the Heritage Herb Gardens at the Ozark Folk Center, in Mountain View, Ark., and Susan Belsinger, a Maryland-based herbalist and writer, recently shared their recipe for growing lavenders and other herbs in pots or in the ground. This aggregate mix combines materials rich in calcium, potash and lime, while ensuring good drainage and the slow release of nutrients.

Combine one gallon each of the following four ingredients in a five-gallon bucket:

Oyster shells, or the poultry feed known as chicken scratch (both have 35 to 55 percent calcium, with trace elements, including aluminum, copper, iron, magnesium, manganese and phosphate). If soil is alkaline, omit this ingredient.

Activated charcoal (the porous carbon, potassium and other minerals improve drainage).

Greensand or glauconite (it has potash, silica, iron oxide, magnesium and other trace elements).

Granite meal, or finely ground granite, another good source of potassium; available at nurseries or on the Web.

Use from one to four gallons per 100 square feet, mixing in; for pots, use 10 percent aggregate to 90 percent compost-rich soil.