

Lavender

Rosemary Holmes

Introduction

Lavender is a very old herb which was used for disinfectant, antiseptic, relaxing, culinary, medicinal and therapeutic purposes as far back as Roman times.

There is an increasing demand in Australia for the use of lavender and Australia can grow a quality crop equal to that produced in France. However, the Australian industry faces strong competition from cheap imported lavender. Large quantities of oil and dried lavender are imported each year.

The key strengths of growing lavender in Australia are our climate and our ability to produce high quality products. A cool climate is preferred but lavenders are now being tested in higher altitudes in Queensland.

Lavender is grown for the fresh flower market, dried flower market, on or off the stem, oils and value-added products for the kitchen, skin care and handicrafts. Many more essential oils are used for aromatherapy, natural therapy centres, craft

designs and culinary purposes. Some 1.8–2 t of oil are exported each year.

Although there are many newcomers across Australia, the industry is still embryonic. There are no major production centres. The Australian Lavender Growers' Association formed in 1995 has about 320 members and is seeking information to set up a detailed data base for the industry. The main competitors for Australian producers are the well-established European growers who have been growing quality lavender for over a century.

Markets and marketing issues

There is no one principal market for lavender in Australia, as most people have only been growing since the 1980s although the Bridestowe Lavender Estate in northern Tasmania has been growing lavender and supplying high quality oil for over eighty years. Most other growers are developing their own niche on local markets.

There is a demand for loose or stripped lavender for the diverse requirements of the craft market, hospitals and nursing homes.

Much of Australia's lavender oil for aromatherapy and craft uses is imported. Stripped lavender, often of lower quality, is also imported from countries such as Bulgaria or Spain for craft purposes.

The average price for dried lavender, depending on the country of origin, ranges from \$10 to \$16.00/kg. Some loose lavender of appalling quality is imported for \$8.00/kg.

Australian production is of superior quality, but production costs are also higher. Stripped lavender grown in Australia is sold for \$18 to \$22/kg wholesale or \$22 to \$38/kg retail, depending on the variety, colour and state in which it is sold. Lavender on the stem sells for \$1.20 to \$2.00 wholesale/kg or \$3.80 to \$6.00/kg retail, again depending on variety and stem length.

Lavender oil distilled by mainland growers is being sold in 10–15 mL bottles for \$7–18/ bottle retail, again depending on the variety and quality. The second-grade oil known as

lavandin oil has a lower price but is used in soaps, toothpaste, and aromatherapy.

Production requirements

Lavenders prefer a cold climate and some varieties will tolerate frost and snow. Some will grow well in coastal areas. Some will survive well inland and others will grow on sub-tropical islands, since there is such a variety of types of lavender. Several different varieties should be tested to see what will grow best in each micro-climate.

Most growers are scattered across New South Wales and Victoria but farms are developing in the southern sections of South Australia and Western Australia and small areas are beginning in Queensland and Tasmania. Australia's largest grower is the Bridestowe Estate in northern Tasmania..

Lavender is hardy, herbaceous, evergreen plant that can thrive under a wide range of soil and climatic conditions but it prefers

a neutral to alkaline soil of pH 7–7.5. It will tolerate drought once the roots are established in the ground. There may be a need to drip feed or irrigate young plants if there is a dry spell, but this is not necessary under normal climatic weather patterns. In a very dry region there may be a need to irrigate for the first year until the roots do become fully developed.

It is essential that lavenders have good drainage, are in full sun and are not planted near eucalyptus trees or any other oil-producing plants as this can interfere with the quality of the oil.

About the author



Rosemary Holmes, in partnership with Edythe Anderson, owns the Yuulong Lavender Estate at Mt Egerton, near Ballarat in Victoria (see Key contacts for address). Yuulong holds the National Registered Collection of Lavenders, which contains over 84 varieties. Yuulong has been growing lavender since 1981 and, with an interim committee, its principals were responsible for the formation of the Australian Lavender Growers' Association.



Hand sickle used to harvest lavender

Varieties/breeds

Some of the species, cultivars and hybrids developing in Australia for fresh/dried flowers and oil include:

Lavandula ∞ *angustifolia* 'Vera'

Lavandula ∞ *angustifolia* 'Bosisto'

Lavandula ∞ *intermedia* 'Seal'

Lavandula ∞ *intermedia* 'Grosso'

Lavandula ∞ *intermedia* 'Miss Donnington'

Lavandula intermedia 'Yuulong'

Key messages

- E Fullsun.
- E Good drainage essential.
- E Prune hard each year and lime in autumn.
- E Do not use too much fertiliser.



Tying lavender in bunches after harvest

Lavandula latifolia

Lavandula dentata var. *candicans*.

Many new lavenders from New Zealand and England are being trialled.

The Australian Lavender Growers' Association can provide lists of nurseries which specialise in lavender and propagate correctly labelled plants.

Agronomy

Lavender will tolerate poor soils, but it is essential to have a total soil analysis done before planting if the crop is to be managed professionally. The area should be ploughed well and lime or dolomite added if the pH is low. Benched rows ensure good drainage. If the site is sloping, they should be on the contour of the hillside to prevent soil erosion. The area between rows can be grassed and mowed in spring and summer. Weed control will be necessary.

If rabbits prove a problem, an individual guard around each plant or the netting of the entire area will be necessary, making certain that the netting goes down into the soil. Rabbits, kangaroos and wallabies do not usually eat the young plants, but will do so in times of drought. They tend to dig up the freshly planted bushes and leave them lying on the ground.

The fertiliser requirements of lavender will depend on the total soil analysis, but it does not need much fertiliser. Potash enhances good floral blooms. Fertilise in the spring.

Bushes are fully mature in about three years depending on the variety, but a small amount of lavender can be harvested from the first year.

Pests and diseases

There are few diseases that effect lavender in Australia.

The spittle bug (*Philaenus spumarius*) may be detected, usually in the spring, as small areas of spittle on the stem of the plant. A small green insect can be found in the spittle but these do little damage and usually can be ignored.

The alfalfa mosaic virus can cause yellow patches on leaves but it will not destroy the plant and aphid control can be investigated if required.

Economics of production and processing

Establishment costs include the purchase of land, if not already owned; a tractor and trailer will

be needed for harvesting and a ride-on mower, if grassing between rows. New growers should budget for a total soil analysis, which could cost between \$80 and \$120 depending on the company.

Purchase of plants in 50 mm pots can cost between 90 cents and \$1.20. Plants in 75 mm pots average \$2.50.

First grade lavender oil for the perfume industry will attract a higher price than the second-grade oil used in aromatherapy.

Lavender yields per bush –
L. *∞ allardii* = 8–10 bunches per bush

L. ‘Seal’, ‘Grosso’, ‘Yuulong’ = 5–7 bunches per bush

L. ‘Vera’ or smaller varieties = 3–4 bunches per bush

Wholesale prices, depending on packaging, average:

Fresh flowers \$2–\$3 per bunch

Dried flowers \$1.50–\$2 per bunch

Stripped lavender \$18–\$22/kg

Retail prices, depending on packaging, average:

Fresh flowers \$4–\$6 per bunch

Dried flowers \$4–\$6 per bunch

Stripped lavender \$23–\$30/kg, depending on the quality

Lavender oil prices;
10 mL bottles average \$7–\$8 each

15 mL bottles average \$10–\$18 each

100 mL bottles average \$45–\$80 each, all depending on quality.

Retail prices vary between areas and States.

Key contacts

The Australian Lavender Growers’ Association
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Key references

McNaughton, Virginia *The Essential Lavender*

McLeod, Judyth *Lavender, Sweet Lavender*

Denny, E. F. K. *Field Distillation for Herbaceous Oils* PO Box 42 Lilydale 7268.

Proceedings International Lavender Conference, Ballarat, Victoria, November 1996 (available from The Treasurer, TALGA, Elmore Lavender Farm, Campaspe St., Elmore 3558)

A list of small publications is also available from TALGA



Hanging bunched lavender to dry