



## Redwood Barn Nursery

1607 Fifth Street Davis, California

### Of Gophers and Lavenders

I have a fraught relationship with gophers.

Generally I am very pacifistic about the animals that share my property. Foxes, coyotes, snakes, raptors (no more chickens for us) liven up country living. Even tree rats do minimal damage, perhaps because of those other species I mentioned. Possums and skunks and feral cats are free to roam the garden and orchard at night.

But our native pocket gopher would drive me to lethal measures, if any actually worked. However, I suppose I should thank them for providing the impetus for the abundance of lavender flowers I enjoy every year, especially right now.

Over a decade ago I cleared out a new area for vegetables. Created furrows and raised beds, put in paths, installed drip irrigation, and planted the most orderly garden I'd ever created.

Gophers, with whom I had coexisted in my orchard for years, suddenly discovered this new area and thought it was nirvana. They followed the irrigation pattern of the drip line in and wiped out everything. I watched, helpless, as they ate thirty pepper plants in thirty days.

I gave up on the site, stuck in a few lavender and herb plants on the raised portions, and moved my vegetable garden to a distant part of the farm.

### Live and let live?

If you're waiting for me to give you gopher suppression advice, you're out of luck.

I have learned a few things about our pocket gophers. They are very territorial: you are, in fact, doing battle with one gopher at a time. If you do succeed in killing that one (yeah, right), a new one will happily move into the established runs. Those underground runs can go for dozens or even hundreds of feet.

This last fact I confirmed by one fruitless attempt at flooding them out. My pump runs at about 60 psi and puts out a large volume of water very rapidly. I found the gopher's working hole, shoved the hose into it, and turned it on full blast. I then watched as water simply disappeared into the soil for 10 to 15 minutes. Finally, about thirty feet away, some bubbled to the surface. By this time, I had sent hundreds of gallons into the run. The next day I found some rather moist 'cleanout' mounds of soil. And another plant was gone.

Later in the season I had noticed that the lavender plants were undamaged. So I started planting more. In fact, I decided to plant as many different kinds of lavender as I could to test the growth habits and performance of the many varieties in the nursery trade.

### Don't gophers eat the lavender?

I make no promises, but apparently not. Or not enough to harm it. I had heard the generalization that gophers don't eat the roots of plants in the mint family, and there seems to be some truth to it. They have left this bed undisturbed since I abandoned growing vegetables there after two seasons. Salvias, catmint (Nepeta), rosemary, thyme, oregano, and other related plants are also untouched. Or unharmed, I'm not sure which. New soil mounds from gophers appear at times, and the plants show no ill effects. Take that for what it's worth....



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From the time that we planted that mixed bed of lavender varieties a dozen years ago, after my vegetables were vanquished, I've been intrigued by the differing growth habits, fragrances, and flowering periods of the many types.

### Flowering times and types

I nearly always have a variety blooming, from early spring to late fall.

The season begins with Spanish lavender (*Lavandula stoechas*), which has become a bedding plant industry staple available in bloom at hardware chains as early as February. It has a showier flower due to a couple of large 'flag' petals on each inflorescence.

There are a bunch of different volatile organic compounds that make up the special scent of lavender, and they are present in oil glands (I assume) in the leaves and petals. Although all lavender smell somewhat resinous, those preferred for perfume, sachets, pot pourri, and nosegays have much sweeter notes. Not Spanish lavender. The fragrance is not desirable, somewhat like turpentine according to one of my scent-testers. But it's a pretty garden plant for full sun and has good drought tolerance.

### Scented foliage

French lavender (*L. dentata*) is a great big background shrub with pine-green leaves. There is a grey-leaved form. The foliage is quite fragrant, the flowers less so. Easy to identify: the leaves are dentate (meaning they have toothed edges). Goodwin Creek is a hybrid from French lavender, also with dentate leaves, but soft grey.

Other than that, you usually aren't buying French lavender. When people ask me for "French lavender" they're usually actually looking for English lavender hybrids with French names: Grosso and Provence.

### Lavenders and Lavandins

Lavender usually refers to varieties of English lavender (*L. angustifolia*, old name *L. officinalis*). These have the sweetest-smelling flowers, blooming mostly May to June.

Lavandins are crosses between English and Portuguese lavenders (*L. spicata*). They were mainly grown for oil. Portuguese lavender lends a camphor fragrance to its progeny. Blooms are extra-fragrant and continue all summer. Many garden varieties have been introduced.

At the end of June into mid-July, these two types overlap in bloom, so that is usually peak bloom time in my lavender bed.

### Common varieties

If you want mid-size (3 foot or so) bushes with grey leaves and exceptionally fragrant flowers for cutting, Grosso and Provence are old, reliable lavandins.

Twickel Purple is a very attractive low growing lavandin with grey foliage and bright, showy flowers.

If you want a somewhat smaller plant with darker purple flowers, Munstead is a popular lavender. It is usually cutting-grown, but sometimes grown from seed so it can be variable as to leaf and flower color.



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If you want an even smaller, tighter-growing, more silver-grey plant with darker purple flowers, Hidcote (pronounced Hide-cote) is a compact, slow-growing lavender.

There are lots of other varieties. New ones with more vivid flowers, on plants with nice uniform growth habit in the 3-foot range, include Phenomenal and SuperBlue.

If you want to fill a lot of space with a low-growing type that blooms over a long season, plant Lavender Lady. It's available from seed (most others are cutting grown), or as seedlings in six-packs, making it inexpensive and suitable for mass planting. I have had Lavender Lady blooming as late as November.

### **Growth habits.**

The shrubs are very drought tolerant, and stay more compact when watered infrequently once established.

Lavender Lady is a loose, low-growing variety that can be kept bushier with trimming, or even planted close together as an informal ground cover.

Goodwin Creek, an Arboretum All-Star, gets huge and has the least typical lavender 'look' of all. The grey fuzzy foliage is soft and very fragrant; the flowers less fragrant. Think of it more as a short-term background shrub in a young perennial border. The fast growth rate gives quick results and provides nice contrasting foliage behind other flowers.

I have found Grosso and Provence nearly interchangeable in the garden, except that Grosso gets a bit bigger and has stouter flowers. If you plant them three feet apart, they'll grow together in a couple of years.

### **Short-lived?**

Individual plants of lavender often kind of fall apart after 3 to 5 years, so they can be described as short-lived. If it's gotten open at the base, with branches sprawling around, you can try pruning it back. I've had mixed results with that, and often just end up replacing them at that point. But with close spacing and occasional addition of new plants to fill bare spots, a bed of lavender can continue for a long time. After twelve years in my planting, some varieties have simply overtaken others.

Another part of their 'short-lived' reputation comes from their propensity to crown and root rots. Plants from Mediterranean-rainfall regions, with dry summers and cool wet winters, are among the most susceptible to phytophthora (see the column from April 3 2019<sup>1</sup>). Watering frequently, especially during hot weather, can kill them. Deep infrequent soakings are best.

### **What they want**

More important is that water drain away from the crown of the plant. I think the fact that mine are in old raised vegetable beds has been the key to success. I wish I could claim credit for this brilliant insight, but it is just the serendipitous effect of gophers having rendered those beds otherwise useless.

The plants are best in full sun. They can tolerate extreme heat, even reflected sun from a hot wall. They aren't fussy as to soil type and don't need any fertilizer.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.davisenterprise.com/features/gardening/the-perils-of-phytophthora/>



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The drought tolerance of lavenders and lavandins makes them great choices in low-water landscapes. They are compatible with other plants from Mediterranean regions, Australia, South Africa, and our California natives.

I water new plants every week or so in their first summer after the initial transplant period. The established bed gets watered very deeply about once a month. Nearby plants include Tuscan Blue rosemary, lemon verbena, native and southwestern salvias, and culinary herbs, along with a small olive tree and a fruiting mulberry. My gopher-ridden vegetable beds have become a Mediterranean retreat.



[http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE\\_gophers%20and%20lavenders/Botta's Pocket Gopher \(Thomomys bottae\).jpg](http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_gophers%20and%20lavenders/Botta's_Pocket_Gopher_(Thomomys_bottae).jpg)

The culprit that drove me from vegetables to mint family members on one part of my property. Lavender is related to rosemary, salvia, nepeta, oregano, thyme, and more. So, I've planted those wherever gophers become a problem, because they don't seem to damage them.

Attribution for gopher picture from Wikimedia Commons:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Botta%27s Pocket Gopher \(Thomomys bottae\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Botta%27s_Pocket_Gopher_(Thomomys_bottae).jpg)



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[http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE\\_gophers%20and%20lavenders/lavender%20bed%20July%202019%202.jpg](http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_gophers%20and%20lavenders/lavender%20bed%20July%202019%202.jpg)

Peak bloom of lavenders and lavandins is in early July. There are varieties that can bloom early in spring (Spanish lavender) and late into fall (lavandin hybrids).



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[http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE\\_gophers%20and%20lavenders/lavender%20with%20male%20digger%20bees.JPG](http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_gophers%20and%20lavenders/lavender%20with%20male%20digger%20bees.JPG)

Bees love lavender flowers! These curious specimens are the males of the digger bee (*Anthophora* species). Their females are underground, nearby. I often find the docile males clustered on flowers of lavender, verbena, or gaura as the day ends.



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[http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE\\_gophers%20and%20lavenders/Lavender%20Phenomenal.jpg](http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_gophers%20and%20lavenders/Lavender%20Phenomenal.jpg)

Tough spot, tough plant. South-facing white wall with sidewalk, both reflecting heat, makes a tough environment for any plant. Lavender can take full sun, heat, and drought. Variety shown here is called Phenomenal.