

GROWERTALKS

Guest Column

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The Nuances of Lavandulas

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On a national level, Munstead and Hidcote define what a basic English lavender does for the industry. They're most common in 4-in. herbs, but you can find them in gallon perennials as well. Twelve-inch Munstead is a touch hardier with a lighter flower and leans toward the culinary side. Eighteen-inch Hidcote has bigger stems with darker flowers, and is a better fit for craft work and oil production. Close behind is Provence, an 18-in. lavandin with intense color, longer wands, a headier scent and high-quality oils.

But money isn't made at the national level, it's made

regionally.

Pictured: Phenomenal harvested from a four-year plant.

Western opportunities

In the west, nearly every lavender is a durable, long-lasting perennial, so the Spanish lavenders dominate. *L. stoechas* have pineapple flowerheads with rabbit ears on top, highly colorful flags that attract attention. Commercial and landscaping markets use them, as well as home gardeners. Lavenders in the west have that "one-and-done" quality, requiring zero attention once established, which is important where labor costs are high. Lots of places don't go below Zone 7, even as north as Oregon and Washington, so it's all about the wet/dry cycles, not the hot/cold ones.

Northern sizes

In the Midwest and New England, lavenders sell as 4-in. herbs, 6-in. gifts or gallon perennials. Refreshing herbs is part of the spring cycle, so lavenders get a free pass here.

Lavenders as gift products found their footing with Anouk, a Spanish lavender tuned for gift production. It flowers in the first year, quickly for a lavender. Then Primavera took over with larger flowers until Anouk Supreme was released. Now the two are neck-and-neck among the sales reps. Anouk has the range of colors, whereas Primavera has the bulk. Anouk likes it cooler for the spring, while Primavera lasts longer in the summer.

Lavender's role as a Northern perennial is nursed by a deep desire and corresponding frustration among gardeners.

Chicago Botanical ran a seven-year study to determine which cultivar could handle their Zone 5 beds. The top three were all English lavenders: Imperial Gem, Royal Velvet and Munstead.

Southern hopes

I'm surprised to say that I have hope for you. Today's choice is the highly regarded Phenomenal, but summer humidity still challenges it. However, two new cultivars are said to thrive in the South. First is Annet, an English released in 2020. It has all the lavender goodness, but goes the distance in the Gulf States, from Florida to the Carolinas.

Second is a native daughter of Georgia, a lavandin foundling called Bridget Chloe. Brand new to market, trays can be hard to find. Neither cultivar can point to a long history in the channel, so it's best to bring trays in for testing if humidity challenges your summer lavender sales.

The Syngenta strategy

Syngenta offers two production styles of lavenders. The Scent series (seed) behaves similarly to annuals. Plants flower the first year, grow fast for quick turns and finish for spring sales. Aromatico (vegetative) follows this same cadence, but it's bigger for gallon pots and blooms later. For Spanish lavenders, use the Castilliano 2.0 series, sized down to better fit cart logistics.

The other cadence follows perennial production. Plant the Sentivia (smaller) or Vintro (larger) series in the fall, bring them through winter and ship in bloom for the earliest sales. Once the house clears, follow up with Scent/Aromatico as a second crop. The Javelin series does the same for the stoechas. Bred to look good growing up more than out, Javelin's columnar shape fits pot tight into larger fields.

The Darwin difference

SuperBlue is their powerhouse, an English lavender sold into Northern landscapes. It has a larger flower size for distant viewing and it's less likely to split under winter weather or rain pressure like Munstead sometimes does. These larger plants deploy into the Midwest, Great Lakes, Northeast and down into the Carolina mountains, planting in the same places you would normally find salvias. Annet covers the Southern market, and out West, the Anouk and *Primavera stoechas* work as perennials.

The Kieft Seed schedule

Breeding at Kieft has organized lavenders into a broad shipping window for lavenders in bloom. They start with Avignon, the early spring variety that needs only 10 daylight hours (DL). It pushes out active green even in cooler temperatures, 50 to 60F (10 to 15C), which makes plants more compatible with other early spring perennials in the cool house. Right behind is the Ellagance series, which needs only 10 DL, but likes warmer temperatures.

Next comes Blue Spears, needing 14 DL and the same temperatures. It has heavy lavender buds at the end of its wand. Last in sequence is Lavance, requiring 14 DL and warmer temperatures to finish off the season.

If you grow just one

The best all-around production cultivar is probably Phenomenal. Known as the forgiving lavender, it accepts a wide range of production situations without complaint. All houses have a temperature gradient from center to edge, so you expect your lavender crop to be a little lopsided. A little taller in the center and a little shorter toward the edges, the plants might have some variations due to how the fans blow around the air. Not Phenomenal. "Like little tin soldiers, all lined up," said one grower. Best yield, least grief he's had from a lavender crop.

If diversity is your game

Call Takao Nursery if you want to zag in the market. They serve North America with varieties hardly found

elsewhere, shipping in liners of 72. Their website is interesting, but a phone call is better. Technically savvy to granular levels, they ask a few questions and route you to alternative varieties, such as:

- Culinary: Royal Velvet
- Dwarf: Nana, Nana Alba, Thumbelina Leigh
- Fernleaf: Goodwin Creek, *L. pinnata* var. *buchii*
- French: Blanc Dentelle
- Oil: Grosso, Gros Bleu
- Reds and pinks: Violet Lace, Fairy Wings, With Love
- Striking: Ghostly Princess

Takao's Tip #1: Water in the morning to dry the crop by evening. Avoids bacterial problems on the leaves. **GT**

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