

Lavender's blue

Dr Nicola Davies speaks to internationally qualified aromatherapist Nadine Tavener about one of the most versatile essential oils - lavender.



There are many varieties of lavender, each with different concentrations of the main components.

According to Tavener, the most effective lavender oil is *Lavandula angustifolia*. "The main therapeutic components of lavender essential oil are linalyl acetate and linalool," she says. "These organic chemicals have been the main focus of clinical trials researching the efficacy of lavender essential oil for medical treatments."

Lavender is far more beneficial than harmful, though occasionally the oil can cause sensitivity in some people. Lavender relieves the pain of rheumatism, arthritis, and muscular pain, as well as headaches and migraines. It is also effective for insect bites and stings, providing both prevention and cure. Its relaxing and antidepressant properties relieve stress, tension, and anxiety. Plus, it's a mild sedative, making it particularly effective for treating nervous conditions and psychiatric disorders. Lavender has been tested in clinical trials for reducing agitation in dementia patients and a lavender oil tablet called Silexan has proven to be an effective alternative treatment to benzodiazepines for generalised anxiety disorder.

Heal mind and body

Lavender can be used undiluted on second degree burns or diluted in water or aloe juice and sprayed onto sunburn. When

using lavender essential oil diluted in a base or carrier, three or four drops to every tablespoon of base is a good ratio. For a relaxing lavender bath, Tavener suggests adding the oil to full cream milk to disperse the oil particles more evenly. Add lavender to an oil base such as olive oil for muscle pain, acne, inflammation, or relieving tension, depression and insomnia; or to arnica oil for bruises, swelling, insect bites, and muscle/joint pain.

Lavender oil can also be inhaled using steam, or by simply placing a few drops on a handkerchief and placing it near the nose. Steam inhalation involves putting several drops of essential oil into a bowl of freshly boiled water and holding your head over the bowl while breathing normally. Draping a towel over your head and the bowl will concentrate the lavender-infused steam, making it more effective. This can be useful for treating insomnia, stress, headaches and sinusitis.

Although it originated in England and France, lavender has adapted well to the Australian climate and is easy to grow. It has a robust root system and doesn't need to be watered frequently. In fact, if you live in a summer rainfall region, you won't need to water it at all. "The easiest way to grow lavender is from cuttings," says Tavener. Select a stalk that doesn't have flowers, cut about 10cm from the tip and remove the leaves and woody exterior from the lower half by running the blade of your pruners gently down the stem. This can then be planted directly in the soil or

D-I-Y: Lavender love

Put dried lavender flowers in a jar of coarse sea salt with a secure lid, stirring the mixture once or twice a week to distribute the lavender oil throughout. The oils will be absorbed by the salt. Lavender cooking oil can be made steeping fresh stalks in olive oil, replacing the lavender weekly for a more intense flavour. "Make sure you rinse the lavender before adding it, as you don't want grit floating in your cooking oil," advises Tavener. Lavender leaves can be used in cooking the same way as rosemary, just in smaller doses since too much can give a bitter taste. "Lavender adds an excellent flavour to fish or potato dishes," says Tavener.



Five to prize

Aside from lavender, keep these oils on-call in your home medicine cupboard:

Tea tree: An anti-bacterial, anti-fungal, anti-viral, immune booster that can be used for acne, cold sores, athlete's foot, and many other ailments.

Eucalyptus: Often used in sinus treatments. It also has sedative properties, so is great for use in a humidifier when you have a cold or sinusitis.

Peppermint: This oil aids digestion, improves focus and concentration, and boosts energy. It is also helpful for cooling fevers.

Lemongrass: A highly effective insect repellent - mosquitoes, flies, ticks and fleas are all kept at bay by this essential oil.

Rosemary: Improves memory and concentration as well as relieving exhaustion. It also improves hair and scalp condition.

kept in a glass of water on a sunny windowsill. "I grow my lavender cuttings in water," says Tavener, "That way I can watch the roots grow and know when they are strong enough to be transplanted." It is important to replace the water whenever it becomes cloudy to prevent decay. Once they are ready to be transplanted, the cuttings need to be placed in a sunny area with well-drained soil.

Lavender can be prepared in several ways. To dry lavender, cut flowering stalks and tie them in a bunch, hanging them upside down for a week or two. Once dried, you can remove the leaves and flowers, which is where all the essential oils are stored, and place them in an airtight container until needed. Lavender tea can settle nerves and help you sleep - steep the leaves and flowers, either fresh or dried, in hot water until cool enough to drink.

"Lavender is truly a remarkable plant," says Tavener. "If you have only one essential oil in your medicine cabinet, or only one herb in your garden, it should be lavender."

Lavender oil brings deep relaxation and helps to encourage gentleness and compassion toward others.