

Moonhawk's Musings

Greetings.

This month I am writing about the herb and essential oil lavender.

I have decided to highlight some of the culinary uses for the herb lavender. Most people know of the essential oil, but using lavender in cooking has largely been forgotten.

Next month I plan to start discussing some of the key concepts behind healing naturally. The key to many natural health programs is to address toxicity, diet, lifestyle, and provide the body with supplements to strengthen and balance the body. More on this next month.

Wishing you many good things

Moonhawk

Lavender



Lavender is a well known plant that is found in many gardens. It is a shrub that grows to around 1m. It has small oblong, silvery grey leaves, with flower spikes. The botanical name of true lavender is *Lavendula angustifolia*. It is also sometimes referred to as *Lavendula officinalis*. The *officinalis* indicates that it is the lavender that is used in medicinal preparations, i.e it is the 'official' lavender. There are a number of other lavenders, including *L. latifolia* (spike lavender), *L. x intermedia* (lavandin), *L. stoechas* (maritime/Spanish lavender), and *L. dentata* (French lavender). There are also a range

of hybrid lavenders available for the garden, that make a pretty edition to any garden. My garden has some of the more traditional lavender varieties, as well as a couple of pretty pink varieties. For the purposes of this article, I am discussing *L. angustifolia*.

I'm sure most of you are familiar with lavender essential oil. In aromatic medicine lavender essential oil is used for the:

- skin for its antimicrobial, soothing, healing properties;
- musculoskeletal system for its analgesic, anti-inflammatory, antispasmodic (aches, pains, cramps) properties;
- nervous system for its ability to inhibit the sympathetic and parasympathetic response to unproductive stress, for its sedative/uplifting properties, and to assist with insomnia due to anxiety & stress,
- reproductive system to assist with pre-menstrual syndrome, dysmenorrhea (painful periods), and in childbirth, and
- respiratory system to ease colds, flu, bronchitis, sinusitis, nervous asthma.

Lavender's most famous use is in the treatment of burns. Once you have cooled the burn in cold running water, add a little lavender essential oil. If the burn is serious, then immediately seek medical assistance.

I use lavender essential oil for a range of conditions. It is one of the few essential oils that can be used neat i.e undiluted. A drop rubbed into insect bites can ease the itch and irritation. Rub

a drop over the temples to ease a headache. Mix up to 10 drops with a tablespoon of milk and add to a bath to ease muscular aches and pains, or stress and tension (the milk will help disperse the essential oil). To ease sinusitis, gently massage a single drop over painful sinuses. (This may make your eyes water, but it will ease the pain). I even use lavender essential oil on cat scratches when my furry family members forget that sharp claws pierce human skin. In this application lavender not only helps prevent infection, it takes the irritation out of the scratch.

As a caution, while a drop of lavender oil may be relaxing, several may be stimulating. When using essential oils it really is a case of 'less is more'. Do not assume that if a single drop is good, several will be better.

Buying Essential Oils

Buying essential oils is not just a matter of going to the supermarket or local health food shop and purchasing whatever is in stock there. When purchasing an essential oil a check of the following will help ensure you receive the best oils available.

Check the label for the following details:

- a) is the oil 100% pure and natural?¹
- b) the botanical name (eg. there are several types of lavender – which one do you want?)
- c) the plant source (eg what part of the plant is used)
- d) uses and cautions
- e) expiry or use by date
- f) supplier details

The essential oils should be in a dark bottle – brown and dark blue are the most common. The cap should still be sealed. If it's been opened and used as a tester it may be contaminated. Always look for an expiry or 'best before' date. Some essential oils have a short shelf life, while others have a longer one.

If you are using lavender essential oil for therapeutic reason, then it is important that you purchase therapeutic grade essential oils. A qualified aromatherapist will be able to recommend suppliers, and aromatherapy books often have suppliers listed. Use these two sources to find out which suppliers are the best and which to avoid. To find a qualified aromatherapist contact the International Aromatherapy & Aromatic Medicine Association (Inc) ([IAAMA](#)).

Be wary of oils that call themselves "fragrant oils". These are usually synthetic and, as the name suggest, smell nice. They may contain some natural product, but it will most likely be as an additive to a synthetic product. These oils rarely have a therapeutic value.

Also be wary of essential oils sold at markets with the sellers own label, or even labelled only as 'lavender'. The source and quality of these oils is generally unknown and there is no guarantee that you are buying a therapeutic quality essential oil.

With essential oils you get what you pay for. This doesn't make the most expensive oils the best. Shop around and compare prices. You'll soon get a feel for the price range of the better quality oils.

Herbal Lavender

The herbal tincture or extract of lavender is less commonly known. Its main use is in assisting with issues with the nervous system such as depression, insomnia, headaches, and indigestion/dyspepsia of nervous origin. Lavender tincture or extract is rarely used on its own, and is usually combined with other herbal tinctures or extracts, for example, eg St John's Wort,

Lime Blossom (depression), Valerian, Oats, Passion Flower (insomnia), Vervain, Feverfew (headaches), Fennel Fenugreek, Chamomile (nervous dyspepsia).

Again, if you think that Lavender may be the herb for you, contact the [Australian Traditional Medicine Society](#) (ATMS) or the [National Herbalist Association of Australia](#) (NHAA) to find a naturopath or herbalist who can correctly prescribe herbal supplements.

Like many natural medicines, studies into the effects of lavender have been mixed, with some coming out in favour of lavender, and some not. However, I think it's worth noting that, in a study into the efficacy of various 'natural' products in treating menopausal symptoms, Newton et al (2006) commented that the multifaceted approach naturopaths use to treat patients, which includes advice on diet and lifestyle, is not replicated in research studies. This may account for poor results in some research studies into other natural therapies. The bottom line is that lavender essential oil has been used successfully for many years to treat a range of health issues.

Safety considerations

There are no known contraindications for the use of lavender.

Care is recommended in pregnancy, as with many essential oils. Always consult with an accredited practitioner before using any essential oil or herbal preparation when pregnant.

Lavender contains compounds which may pass into breast milk, causing a mild carminative effect in the baby.

Lavender should not be prescribed to people who are sensitive to the Labiatae family of plants. Always do a small skin test before using lavender to test for sensitivity.

Reference: Herbs & Natural Supplements: An evidence based guide (2nd Edition), by Lesley Braun and Marc Cohen. The Complete Guide to Aromatherapy (2nd Edition) by Salvatore Battaglia. The Essential Guide to Herbal Safety, by Simon Mills and Kerry Bone. Medicinal Plants of the World by Ben-Erik van Wyk & Michael Wink. In-Tele-Health © 2008 (from Hyperhealth Pro CD-ROM). Newton, K.M., Reed, S.D., LaCroix, A.Z., Brothaus, L.C., Ehrlich, K., & Guiltinan, J. (2006). Treatment of Vasomotor Symptoms of Menopause with Black Cohosh, Multibotanicals, Soy, Hormone Therapy, or Placebo. *Annals of Internal Medicine*. Vol 145(12). pp. 869-879

Cooking with Lavender

When cooking with lavender make sure you use a lavender that is suitable for consumption. I buy 'culinary' dried lavender from [Herbies](#) in Sydney, but there are other companies that you can source culinary lavender from.

Lavender makes a good addition to savoury dishes such as soups and casseroles. Add around a teaspoon towards the end of the cooking process. Lavender is probably best included along with other herbs such as rosemary, thyme, sage, parsley, bay, and other savoury herbs.

For sweet dishes, try lavender ice-cream or lavender cake.

Lavender & Honey Ice-cream (best made in an ice-cream maker). This is a surprisingly delicious ice-cream.

Ingredients

2 tablespoons dried lavender	¼ cup boiling water
2 eggs	600ml cream
½ cup honey	1 teaspoon vanilla extract

Method

Pour the boiling water over the lavender and steep for 30 minutes. Strain, and set aside liquid.

Warm the cream and honey to just below boiling.

Beat the eggs. Add a small amount of the hot cream to the eggs, mix well. Pour this back into the rest of the cream and stir constantly over low heat until the mix thickens slightly. **Do not let the mix boil.** If you prefer you can use a double boiler for this step. Remove from the heat and stir in the lavender liquid. Cool the mix in the fridge and then make the ice-cream in your ice-cream maker according to manufacture's instructions.

Lavender Cake

This is a recipe I adapted from Nigella Lawson's Rosemary Loaf Cake. (If you're into cooking, then *How to be a Domestic Goddess* by Nigella Lawson is a wonderful addition to your recipe library). I've made this for office morning teas, and for a casual dessert when guests come round for lunch or dinner. Most people comment on its unusual flavour. So far no-one has disliked it.

Ingredients

250g unsalted butter – softened to room temperature	200g caster sugar
3 large eggs (duck eggs for preference, but hen eggs will do fine)	
210g gluten free self raising flour	90g gluten free plain flour
1 teaspoon vanilla extract	1 tablespoon dried lavender
4 tablespoons milk.	

Method

Line a 23cm x 13cm x 7cm loaf tin with baking paper.

Preheat oven to 170 Celsius

Mix the self raising and plain flour together.

Cream the butter and sugar until light and fluffy. Add the eggs one a time, beating well after each. Add the vanilla and beat well. Fold in the flour in 2 -3 batches. Adding the milk in after the first batch. The batter should be smooth and not too thick or gluggy. Add a little more milk if the batter is too thick. Fold in the lavender. Pour batter into the loaf tin. Bake for 50 minutes and test. If a skewer comes out clean, the cake is cooked. If not, bake for a further 10 minutes.

Cool the cake in its time on a wire rack. Turn out when cooled completely.

I like to serve this cake with mixed berries and cream, although it is quite delicious on its own.

Variation: To turn this cake back into a rosemary cake, leave out the dried lavender and add the chopped needles from a 10cm stalk of fresh rosemary. Finely chop the needles, then fold into the batter.

Lavender Tea

Infuse 1 teaspoon of dried lavender in 1 cup of boiling water to 5-10 minutes. Add a little honey to sweeten and sip while still warm. This is a relaxing tea that may ease headaches and tension.