



How to Grow Lavender

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Planting, pots and pruning for UK gardens



How to Grow Lavender in the UK

Lavender is the plant people most often ask me about, and the one they most often kill. There is a particular sort of disappointment that comes from planting a lovely young lavender in spring, watching it flower beautifully through summer, and then finding it brown, woody and half dead the following spring. I have had it happen, years ago, before I understood what lavender actually wants from a British garden. The good news is that once you get a few fundamentals right, lavender is one of the longest-lived and lowest-maintenance plants you can grow in the UK.

This guide covers how to grow lavender in the UK properly. The varieties that actually survive our winters, the soil and drainage that keep it alive, how to grow it in pots, and the pruning regime that is the single biggest factor in whether your lavender lives for fifteen years or collapses into a woody mess after three. Most of what kills UK lavender is entirely preventable.

Why Lavender Struggles in UK Gardens

Lavender comes from the dry, sunny, stony hillsides of the Mediterranean. Everything about how it grows is built around hot sun, sharp drainage, and poor soil. Then we bring it to Britain, plant it in heavy damp soil, and give it a cool wet winter, and we wonder why it sulks. The two things that kill UK lavender are wet roots and a lack of sun, in that order.

It is almost never the cold that does it. The hardy English lavenders shrug off temperatures well below anything a normal UK winter throws at them. What they cannot tolerate is sitting in cold, wet, poorly-drained soil for months on end. The roots rot, fungal problems set in, and the plant dies from the bottom up. If you have read my guides on how to grow rosemary in the UK or how to grow thyme in the UK, this will sound familiar, because lavender, rosemary and thyme all want the same fundamental conditions and all die the same way when they do not get them.

Get the drainage and the sun right and everything else is easy. Get them wrong and no amount of care will save the plant. So those two things are where this guide spends most of its attention.

The Best Lavender Varieties for the UK

Choosing the right type of lavender matters enormously in the UK, because the different species vary hugely in hardiness. Get this wrong and your plant may not survive its first winter regardless of how well you look after it.

English lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*) – the hardy choice

This is the one to grow in the UK. Fully hardy, beautifully scented, reliable, and long-lived. The classic varieties are Hidcote (compact, deep purple, the most popular) and Munstead (slightly taller, softer blue), both widely stocked by UK suppliers like Sarah Raven. Both survive UK winters across the whole country without protection, given decent drainage. If you want one lavender that just works, plant Hidcote. The RHS lavender growing guide has a good rundown of the named *angustifolia* varieties.

Lavandin (*Lavandula x intermedia*) – bigger and later
A hybrid, larger than English lavender, flowering later in summer with longer stems. Varieties like Grosso and Phenomenal are popular. Reasonably hardy in most of the UK but slightly less bulletproof than English lavender in a hard winter. Good for hedging and for cutting because of the long stems.

French and Spanish lavender (*Lavandula stoechas*) – pretty but tender



English lavender on the left (hardy), French lavender on the right with its distinctive rabbit-ear petals (tender).

The ones with the distinctive flouncy “rabbit ear” petals on top of the flower heads. Undeniably gorgeous, and widely sold in garden centres in spring, but here is the honest truth most labels do not make clear: they are not reliably hardy in the UK. In a mild winter in the south they may survive. In a normal or cold winter, or anywhere in the north, they usually die. Grow them in pots that you can move somewhere sheltered over winter, or treat them as a beautiful short-term plant. Do not plant them in the ground expecting them to come back year after year like English lavender will.

My honest advice for almost everyone in the UK: grow English lavender (Hidcote or Munstead) as your main plant. Add a French lavender in a pot if you love the look, but know it is the tender one.

Planting Lavender in the UK

When to plant

Spring is the best time to plant lavender in the UK, from April through to early June, once the soil has started to warm and the worst frosts have passed. Spring planting gives the roots a full growing season to establish before they have to cope with their first wet winter, which is when most newly-planted lavender is lost. You can plant in early autumn (September) in milder areas, but spring is far more reliable. UK vegetable planting calendar covers timing for everything else through the year.

Position and sun

Full sun, as much as you can possibly give it. Lavender needs at least six hours of direct sun a day to grow well, flower properly, and develop the oils that give it scent. A south-facing spot is ideal. In shade or part shade, lavender grows leggy, flowers poorly, and is far more likely to succumb to damp and disease. If you only have a shady garden, lavender is honestly not the plant for you.

Soil and drainage



On clay soil, mix plenty of grit into the planting hole and plant slightly raised with a gravel mulch.

Free-draining and on the poor, alkaline side. Lavender hates rich soil and it hates wet soil. If you have light sandy or chalky soil, you can more or less plant straight in. If you have heavy clay, like much of the UK, you need to do some work first. How to tell if your garden soil is clay, loam or sand covers the simple checks.

On clay, dig a wide planting hole and mix the excavated soil with a generous amount of horticultural grit, roughly half soil and half grit. Plant the lavender slightly proud of the surrounding soil so that water drains away from the crown rather than pooling around it. Finish with a mulch of gravel or grit around the base, never bark or compost, which hold moisture against the stem..

The whole idea is to create a dry, sharply-drained pocket in the middle of your damp British garden. How to improve drainage in clay soil and how to improve garden soil in the UK cover the wider work

Spacing for a lavender hedge

Lavender makes a beautiful low informal hedge, which is one of the most popular ways to grow it in the UK. For a hedge, plant English lavender about 30cm apart and lavandin about 45cm apart. The plants knit together over two or three seasons into a continuous fragrant row. A lavender hedge along a path is one of the loveliest things you can grow, and the bees will thank you for it.

Growing Lavender in Pots



A large terracotta pot with a gritty mix is the easiest way to grow lavender on heavy clay.

Lavender does very well in pots, and for many UK gardens, especially those with heavy clay or limited sun, a pot is genuinely the easier option. You control the drainage completely, you can stand the pot in the sunniest spot you have, and you can move tender French lavenders under cover for winter.

Pot and compost

Use a pot at least 30 to 40cm across, since lavender develops a substantial root system and resents being cramped. Terracotta is better than plastic because it breathes and helps the compost dry out, which lavender prefers. Fill with a free-draining mix, roughly two thirds peat-free multipurpose compost to one third horticultural grit. Do not use rich water-retentive compost on its own, it stays too wet. Peat-free compost in the UK and best compost for vegetables both cover what to buy, and growing vegetables in pots in the UK covers the container basics that apply here too.

Watering pot lavender

Sparingly. Water a newly-planted lavender to settle it in, then only when the compost has dried out. Established lavender in a pot needs watering perhaps once a week in hot dry summer weather and almost never in winter. The most common way people kill potted lavender is by watering it too often and leaving it to sit in a wet saucer. Never leave a saucer under a lavender pot. How often to water plants in the UK covers the wider principle, which lavender takes to an extreme.

How to Prune Lavender (the Most Important Job)

If there is one thing that separates a lavender that lives for fifteen years from one that collapses into a woody mess after three, it is pruning. This is the job most people get wrong, usually by not doing it at all, and it is genuinely the single most important piece of lavender care.

Lavender that is never pruned grows leggy, the base turns to bare grey wood, the flowering gets sparse, and eventually the plant splits open in the middle and looks terrible. Once lavender has gone fully woody it is very hard to rescue, because, like rosemary and thyme, it does not reliably regrow from old bare wood. Prevention is the only real cure, and prevention means pruning every single year.



Prune into a tight dome each August, cutting into green growth but never into the old bare wood.

When and how to prune

Main prune: late summer, just after flowering (usually August). This is the important one. Once the flowers have faded, cut the whole plant back by about a third, shaping it into a neat dome. Cut into the soft green growth but never back into the old bare wood at the base.

Optional light tidy in spring (April). A gentle trim to remove any winter-damaged tips and reshape, but the main work is the late summer prune.

The golden rule: never cut into old grey wood. Always leave some green growth on every stem you cut. If you cut a stem back to bare wood, that stem often will not regrow.

A lavender pruned hard into a tight dome every August will stay compact, bushy, and floriferous for a decade or more. It looks brutal when you do it, like you have given the plant a severe haircut, but it is exactly what keeps the plant young. The single biggest favour you can do your lavender is to be braver with the shears than feels comfortable, while always stopping short of the old wood. It sits naturally alongside the rest of the late-summer work in August gardening jobs in the UK.

Growing Lavender from Seed

You can grow lavender from seed, but I would not recommend it as a first option. The seed is slow and erratic to germinate (often 3 to 4 weeks, sometimes longer, and germination rates are patchy), the seedlings are tiny and slow, and a seed-grown plant takes two to three years to reach flowering size. Named varieties like Hidcote do not come true from seed either, so you cannot reliably reproduce a specific variety this way.

For one or a few plants, buy them. A small lavender at a garden centre costs a few pounds and flowers the same year. For a whole hedge, where you might need a dozen or more plants, taking cuttings from one bought plant is far quicker and more reliable than seed. Seed only really makes sense if you want a large number of plants and do not mind waiting a couple of years and accepting some variability.

If you do want to try seed, sow in spring on the surface of moist seed compost (lavender needs light to germinate), barely cover, and keep warm. How to grow vegetables from seed in the UK covers the wider technique.

Taking Lavender Cuttings (Free Plants for a Hedge)

This is how you get a whole lavender hedge for the price of one plant. Lavender cuttings root readily and it is genuinely easy once you have done it once.

Take semi-ripe cuttings in summer, ideally July or August, from non-flowering shoots of the current year's growth.

Cut 8 to 10cm lengths, ideally pulling them off with a small "heel" of older wood attached.

Strip the lower leaves, leaving a tuft at the top.

Push into a pot of gritty free-draining compost, several cuttings around the edge of one pot.

Water once, then keep somewhere bright but out of scorching sun. Keep barely moist.

Cuttings root within 4 to 6 weeks. Pot on individually once you see new growth.

One healthy lavender can give you a dozen or more cuttings in a summer, enough to plant a decent hedge the following year for nothing.



A lavender hedge along a path in full bloom, one of the best plants for UK pollinators.

Getting Lavender Through Winter

For hardy English lavender planted in free-draining soil or a gritty pot, winter needs no special effort. The plant is fully hardy and survives any normal UK winter outdoors. The drainage you sorted at planting time is what carries it through. No fleece, no wrapping, nothing.

French and Spanish lavenders are the exception. These tender types should be moved somewhere sheltered for winter, ideally a cold but frost-free greenhouse, porch, or a sheltered spot against a south wall. If they are in pots, this is easy. If they are in the ground, accept they may not survive and treat them as a bonus if they do. Frost damage on plants in the UK covers protection for genuinely tender plants.

For all lavender in pots, the winter routine is the same as rosemary and thyme: stand the pot on pot feet so it drains freely, move it somewhere sheltered if you can, and never let it sit in standing water. Winter wet, not winter cold, is what you are guarding against.

Harvesting and Using Lavender

Harvest lavender flowers just as the buds are showing colour but before they fully open, which is when the scent and oil content are at their strongest. Cut the stems long, in the morning after the dew has dried. Bundle them, tie the stems, and hang upside down in a cool airy place to dry for a couple of weeks.

Dried lavender keeps its scent for months and is lovely in bunches, in drawers, in homemade lavender bags, or stripped for use in baking and cooking (culinary lavender should be English lavender, which has the sweetest flavour). Cutting flowers for drying also doubles as a light prune, though it does not replace the main hard prune in late summer.

One of the great joys of lavender is what it brings to the garden while it flowers. A row of lavender in full bloom in June and July hums with bees and is one of the best plants you can grow for pollinators in a UK garden. our guide to growing herbs covers the wider herb garden if you want to build lavender into a broader planting.

Common Lavender Problems

Plant going woody and bare at the base. The classic lavender problem, caused by not pruning. Prune hard every August into a dome, never into old wood. A plant already badly woody is usually best replaced.

Dying over winter. Almost always waterlogged roots, not cold. Improve drainage with grit, raise the plant, switch to a gritty pot. Check you have not planted a tender French type expecting it to be hardy.

Leggy growth, few flowers. Too much shade, or too rich a soil. Move to full sun and stop feeding.

Yellowing leaves. Usually overwatering or soil too rich. Lavender wants poor dry conditions. Ease off the water.

Grey mould or rot in wet summers. Poor airflow and damp. Prune to open up the plant, improve drainage, avoid overhead watering.

Froghoppers (cuckoo spit). The frothy white blobs on stems in early summer. Harmless to established lavender, just wash off with a hose if it bothers you.

Common Questions About Growing Lavender

What is the best lavender to grow in the UK?

English lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*) is the best choice for UK gardens. Varieties like Hidcote and Munstead are fully hardy across the whole country, beautifully scented, and long-lived given good drainage. Avoid French and Spanish lavender (*Lavandula stoechas*) for permanent outdoor planting, as they are not reliably hardy in UK winters.

Why does my lavender keep dying?

The most common cause is waterlogged soil, not cold. Lavender comes from dry Mediterranean hillsides and cannot tolerate wet roots through a UK winter. Improve drainage by adding grit, planting slightly raised, and using a gravel mulch. The second most common cause is a lack of sun, or planting a tender French variety expecting it to be hardy.

When should I plant lavender in the UK?

Spring, from April to early June, is the best time to plant lavender in the UK. This gives the roots a full growing season to establish before facing their first wet winter, which is when most newly-planted lavender is lost. Early autumn planting is possible in mild areas but spring is far more reliable.

How do you prune lavender?

Prune the main time in late summer, just after flowering (usually August). Cut the whole plant back by about a third into a neat dome, cutting into soft green growth but never into the old bare wood at the base. An optional light tidy in spring removes winter damage. Pruning every year is the single most important job for keeping lavender from going woody.

Can you grow lavender in pots in the UK?

Yes, and it is often easier than growing in the ground, especially on heavy clay. Use a 30 to 40cm terracotta pot with a free-draining mix of two thirds peat-free compost to one third grit. Place in full sun, water sparingly, never leave it in a saucer of water, and stand the pot on feet for drainage over winter.

Does lavender need full sun?

Yes. Lavender needs at least six hours of direct sun a day to grow well, flower properly, and develop its scent. In shade it grows leggy, flowers poorly, and is far more prone to damp-related disease. A south-facing position is ideal. Lavender is not a suitable plant for a shady garden.

How do you take lavender cuttings?

Take semi-ripe cuttings in July or August from non-flowering shoots of this year's growth. Cut 8 to 10cm lengths, strip the lower leaves, and push several into a pot of gritty free-draining compost. Water once, keep bright and barely moist, and they root in 4 to 6 weeks. One plant gives enough cuttings to plant a whole hedge the following year.

A Sensible Place to Start

If you have never grown lavender, here is the plan. Buy one English lavender, Hidcote or Munstead, at a garden centre in spring. If your soil is free-draining and sunny, plant it straight into the ground slightly raised with a gravel mulch. If your soil is heavy clay, plant it into a 35cm terracotta pot with two thirds peat-free compost and one third grit instead. Stand it in the sunniest spot you have. Water it in, then leave it largely alone. Prune it hard into a dome every August after flowering. That is genuinely the whole job.

That one plant will reward you with scent, flowers and bees for ten to fifteen years if you prune it every year. In its second summer, take a few cuttings and you will have enough plants for a lavender hedge the year after, all for free.

How to Contact the Editor

If you have comments or you know I have given wrong advice then please contact me by email at

info@yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk

If you have something to contribute or have a say on allotment life, then please use my email to send your contributions.

I am going to process the magazine issue once a month, so if there are comments you would like to make they can be answered in future editions.

I would like to add that most of the articles are taken off the web and some well known gardening and allotments magazines have been read in the making of our magazine content.

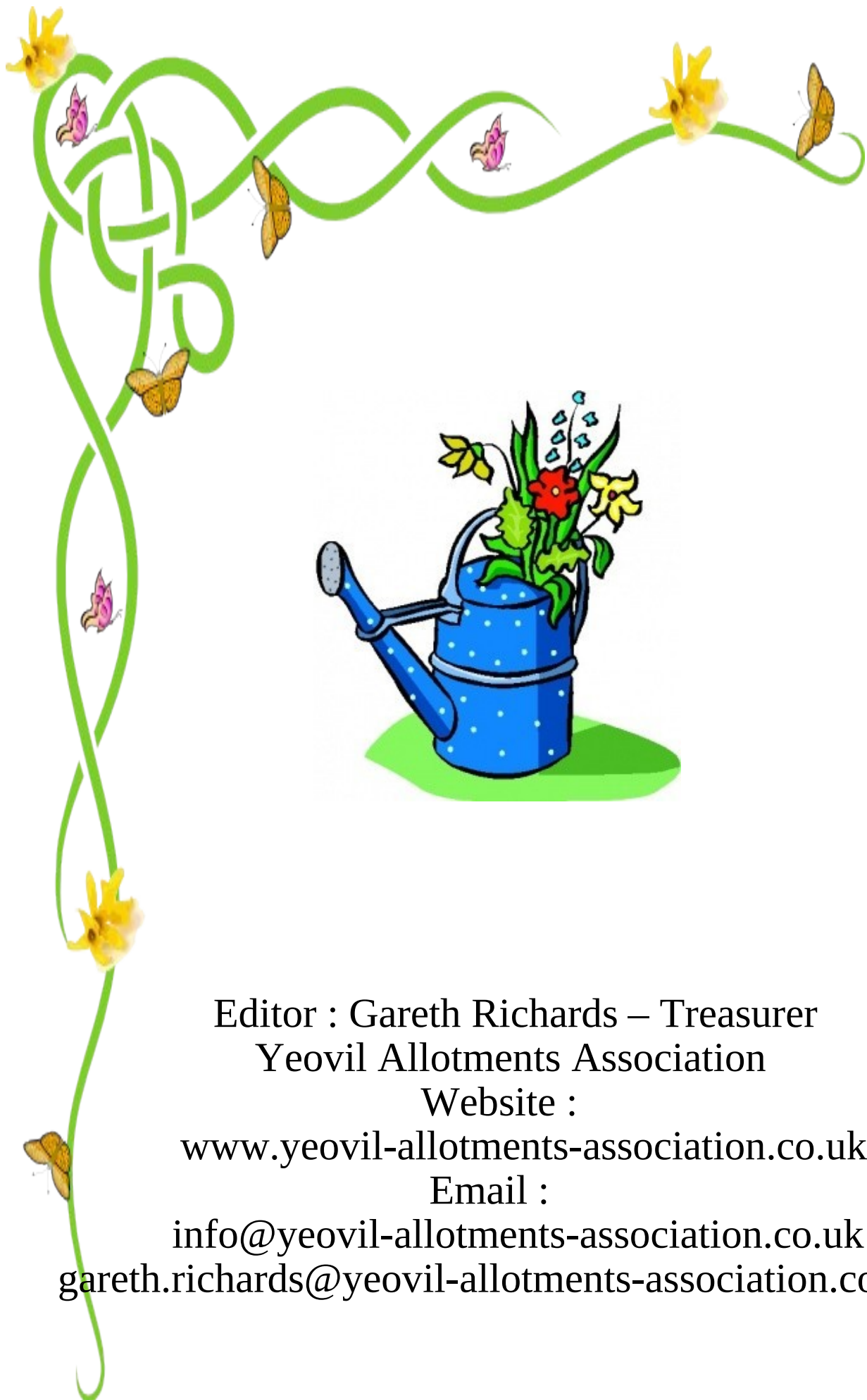
We also have our own website at :

www.yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk

where you can find this magazine as well as a catalogue

Happy Allotmenting and best wishes,

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