

# Good Words

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## SWEET LAVENDER

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THE British climate is notoriously a collection of odds and ends which no country would tolerate—if it could help it! And the British agriculturist has long been in a bad way. But in one thing we hold our own, and that is the growing of lavender. The oil distilled from the English flowers fetches in the open market ten or twelve times as much as that imported from the Continent and elsewhere.

This overwhelming superiority is variously accounted for; some allege that the imported oil is made from stalks as well as flowers—a fatal error—others that it comes of the difference in the variety of lavender. Ours is the *Lavandula vera*. The chemists have failed to show where the difference lies. On analysis the finest English oil and the worst of the foreign give practically the same results. But anyhow there is a difference; something to be thankful for with English wheat still on the downward path and Kent hops in the same way.

Half a century ago there was a great lavender area a stone's throw from London. Lavender fields stretched from Croydon to Battersea; and the Londoner sported holiday attire for the August pleasure fair on Mitcham Green, and wandered into the fields to see the harvest. The names of Lavender Hill and Lavender Sweep remain to tell the tale. There was a lavender farm close to the Crystal Palace not so long ago. In 1870, going by rail from West Croydon to Sutton, lavender fields could be seen as far as the eye could reach. The blue of the sky seemed to have come down to earth; the perfume crossed the path of the train. There were not less than five hundred acres under cultivation in the district. Now you can walk from Mitcham Junction to Croydon, on through Beddington and Wallington to Carshalton and

back to Mitcham, without seeing a single spike, unless in a cottager's garden. Fields there are still in the neighbourhood, and at least one prosperous distillery, but the industry is none the less a dying one. Hitchin is now the centre of lavender culture.



CUTTING LAVENDER

Lavender comes of an odorous race; it is one of the Labiatae or lip flowers, which include mint, thyme, rosemary, balm, sage, and marjoram. But though grown to such perfection in this country, it is not indigenous. Those excellent people the Huguenots, when they settled in the valley of the Wandle in 1568, are said to have brought it from its home on the hills of Naples. It is a native of Persia, too, of the Canaries, the Barbary States, and the greater part of the south of Europe—that of Mont Blanc is said to be the finest. For it affects altitudes, and has been found in North Africa growing in dry stony soil five thousand feet above sea level. However, there are at least twenty different varieties. There is the specious “sea lavender” which grows on the salt marshes and has no scent, and the “cotton lavender” with yellow spikes instead of blue. From the *lavandula spica*, grown on the Continent, oil of spike is made, now chiefly used in the preparation of pigments in porcelain painting. Some of the rarer

members of the tribe, with divided leaves, have a place in the greenhouses.

But the English lavender is a hardy plant which would disdain so luxurious a setting. It delights in loamy land, with a chalky subsoil, well open to the sun and air. There is warrant for saying that it will grow on ground which would not support any other crop of value.

Planting goes on in September or October. When in the spring the lavender shows signs of flower it is ruthlessly clipped. This is done sometimes twice or three times, for it is essential to strength that no flowers should be formed the first season. When a year old they are planted out in rows with breathing spaces of three feet between. If oil is scarce and dear, they are allowed to flower the second year, but it is better to clip them again and wait till they have reached their prime in the third year. They are at their best till the fifth; in the seventh or eighth they have served their time, are rooted up and become brands for the burning. The harvest falls about the end of July or the beginning of August. A dry warm season with gentle showers between suits lavender best. If garnered in showery weather the yield of oil is greater, whilst continued drought taints it with a rank odour. The flowers must be fully expanded when gathered. They are cut from the plants with short reaping hooks, tied in bundles, taken from the field, and then stripped from the stalks. As the pans fill with the odorous blossoms they are transferred to the still. From a half to a ton of them

fills the still; from twenty to thirty women will be working hard for six or seven hours to make up the quantity. The oil is contained in glands on the calyx, corolla, and leaves, and to a smaller extent in the branches of the flower stalks.

Women work in the fields too, following the men who reap, and tying up the harvest in mats. This protects it from the sun, which would otherwise "heat" the lavender and injure the oil. In a good year a ton will give up as much as twenty-one pounds of oil, at other times no more than fifteen or sixteen, and in bad seasons the yield may fall as low as ten. The distillation starts at four or five in the morning and lasts till ten at night; continuing from about the first week in August till the end of October.



STRIPPING THE STALKS



IN THE STILL-ROOM

Each operation takes about two-and-a-half hours, the largest quantity of oil coming over during the first hour and a half. A considerable part of the time is taken up in filling and emptying the still. This is of copper, with a fluid capacity of about two hundred gallons. The flowers are packed in tightly by treading—work to get accustomed to, for the boys employed are often severely stung by the bees concealed within the bunches. After a few days, however, the stings cause little or no pain. Hundreds of these bees, drunk with sweets, refuse to be dislodged either by the reapers or the trimmers, and find their way into the still, there to realise too late that enough is better than a feast.

For the still is filled with boiling water and sudden death environs them round about. The head of the still is put on, and luted with clay. It resembles nothing so much as an enormous tobacco pipe, bowl downwards. The furnace is lighted, and the oil passes off carried on the wings of the steam, which condenses again in the cool of the receiver, the oil floating on the top. On the removal of the water with a syphon the oil remains behind. The head of the still is taken off and the sodden mass of flowers taken out with long forks. They go back to the land to fertilise the next crop.

Bottling the oil for a twelvemonth mellows it, takes away the harshness, and turns it from a light brown to a pale gold. Up to three years it improves, but deteriorates if kept longer. The subtle individuality of the lavender lies hidden in the oil. This must be diluted with from twenty to forty times its bulk of spirit before it is revealed. The oil is a quite impossible perfume, though the generation which four or five decades ago reeked with bergamot and patchouli might have borne it. Sometimes lavender water is a bouquet of scents of which the lavender is the key note. Commonly it is mixed with rose water as well as spirit. Piesse in his "Art of Perfumery" says: "English oil of lavender, four ounces; spirits of wine, three quarts; rose water, a pint." The filter does the rest.

For the uses to which the foreign oil is put the English would be far too costly. Its mission is to scent my lady's gloves and kerchief and to preserve the blush-rose of her cheeks.

In each bright drop there is a spell; 'Tis from the soil we love so well, From English gardens won

It is of approved virtue in the bath. That is why the Romans called it *lavandula*. Our modern beauties do it ample honour.

There is a famous firm who tell with pride of a single order from one customer for thirty quarts of lavender water for the bath. The foreign oil is used in the manufacture of cheap soaps and in pomades and hair washes. It is true that cheap lavender water is made of it, but not for persons of taste. For the best French oil can be bought for eighteen shillings the pound, whilst English costs sixty, eighty, ninety, and sometimes a hundred shillings. In the black year of 1881, one hundred and sixty shillings were paid.

In Worcestershire the cottagers eke out their earnings by selling lavender water made from the produce of their gardens. They gather the flowers, and send them mixed with rosemary, red roses, musk and thyme to the nearest town to be

converted into the sovereign water. "Old Izaak" took friend Venator to an alehouse where there was a cleanly room with lavender at the windows. Venator was well content—for "the linen looks white and smells of lavender, and I long to lie in a pair of sheets that smell so." The excellent practice of laying up linen in lavender is happily still popular. The cutting of the bunches to be sold for this purpose takes place early in the season and lasts a month. The quiet squares of the West and West Central districts of London are much affected by the lavender seller. "Who'll buy my lavender, fresh lavender, sweet blooming lavender—who'll buy?" A cheerful pleasant refrain; but in fact he drones it out in a melancholy way.



There are lavender sachets and lavender "faggots" besides. The flowers for sachets are ground and mixed with a proportion of the fragrant gum of benzoin. The faggots are cut when the flowers are fully expanded, and the spikes are slowly dried before tying. These, like the bunches, are designed for the linen press,

Hitchin has grown lavender for more than three centuries. The largest farm lies on the west side of the town hard by the house where George

Chapman lived, the translator of Homer, the friend of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson. Will himself may have walked and talked in the fields azure. "Here's flowers for you," says he, "hot lavender, mint, savoury marjoram." Spenser speaks of "the wholesome sage and lavender still grey." The Abbess Hildegard, who lived near Bingen on the Rhine, mentions it in the remote twelfth century. The "palsy drops" of the old herbalists were a lavender essence, which still has a place in the pharmacopeia, as a stimulant for wearied nerves. You would not think that in Araby the blest they had "coughs and spasms." It seems they do, and lavender is the remedy.

Alarmist reports were on foot a year or two ago that lavender culture was dying. The daily newspapers were hard put to it for something scaring. The experts and authorities promptly crushed them and proved not only that the average was not decreasing, but that the output in that year had been larger than ever. "Our Special Correspondent," however, did service in pointing out that foreign oil was sometimes sold as English. In a census of scents a few years ago lavender water came out at the top, with an immense majority. Many a perfume besides, perhaps with a high-sounding name, owes the chief part of its charm to Sweet Lavender.

*Illustrations scanned from a photocopy among Eric Montague's papers*

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