

fresh

LAVENDER

Lavender is an integral part of the British cottage garden, as well as being a natural remedy for insomnia. Paul Gayler reveals that it's also a delicious culinary ingredient

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GARETH MORGANS AND SANDRA LANE

I TEND to cook with lavender as I do with most herbs, go lightly at first to test the intensity and depth of flavour, then add more as needed. In Provence, lavender is used to make wonderful honey but also added to sauces, to flavour delicate *crème brûlées*, to sweeten fruit tarts and as an interesting flavour for a sauce with roast duck. Elsewhere in Europe, especially the Mediterranean, lavender also has a place in cookery. The Moroccans, for example, use dried lavender with salt and spices to flavour meats: in fact, I have an old recipe for *ras el hanout* (Moroccan spice mix with about 20 spices, meaning 'head of the shop') in my possession, which contains lavender.

If you browse through old English recipes, you'll discover that lavender was used extensively in cooking, its intense yet gentle sweetness valued in puddings and in candied fruits. Cooking with lavender opens up a great range of interesting uses. I like to use it to flavour milk puddings, custards, butters, mousses, sauces and ice creams. I have also used lavender successfully in a stuffing for roasted fowl, or added to salads as you would with other flowers.

LAVENDER'S BLUE

Lavender is a perennial herb that can grow from 30-90cm (1-3ft) tall. There are three main varieties which, in turn, have up to a further 20 varieties. Usually only

"Lavender has been cultivated for centuries, not just for its sweet-smelling freshness and use as a beauty fragrance, but as a culinary herb with medicinal qualities"

Most people associate lavender with soaps, perfumes and for its use in aromatherapy to soothe and calm. As far back as early Roman and Greek times, people would bathe in water scented in lavender. The name lavender actually derives from the Latin word *lavare*, meaning to wash. Its use as a medicinal plant is well known, treating a number of conditions such as insomnia, migraine headaches, irritability, stress and depression.

Queen Elizabeth I is said to have drunk lavender-infused water daily as a relief for her well documented migraine and other ailments. She was a great general supporter of lavender and often had her breakfast conserves flavoured with it. The Elizabethans, in general, considered it an aromatic

unless you grow it yourself, there is a move among chefs to make more use of it. Chefs like myself, in an effort to create new dishes and flavour combinations, source lavender from flower markets and growers, so if you look around, it is available. And it's easy to find in the country in the summer.

When sourcing lavender, however, it's important to buy it untreated with pesticides or fragrance enhancers, which not only affect its gentle natural aroma but could upset your digestion, if you're unsure whether it's been treated or not, wash it thoroughly. There's no doubt in my mind that lavender is in for a major comeback over the next few years. It has a unique flavour, but it must be fresh. On no account be tempted to use sachets or pot-pourri bags with their chemically intensified aroma, making them inedible. Ideally, pick your own lavender in the wild or from your garden.

PREPARATION AND STORAGE

To prepare lavender for cooking, simply pick off the little flowers from the stems and use as directed by the recipe.

When recipes call for dried flowers, simply put the flowers on a baking sheet and dry in pre-heated oven 50°C/100°F/lowest gas setting possible for an hour.

Alternatively, for those in a hurry, you can put the

SIMPLY LAVENDER

Basic herb salad
— Mix of thyme, basil and fennel
a decidedly per-
slightly rosily t-
with hints of cit-
grilled fish, mes-

— Add a little lavender
classic tomato
pasta or a base
adds an intriguing

— Lavender goes
with fruits, in p-
raspberries and

— Try adding lavender
basic English cu-
(crème anglaise)
of elegance to a

— Crystallised lavender
wonderful. Use
desserts and po-

— Lavender has
affinity with mi-
During the sum-
try a chilled tea
with lemon, mi-
lavender. Wo-
summer's day

— With lavender
colour and swe-
try a little added
a garnish, either
other blossoms
buds or purple
striking presen-

— To make lavender
put lavender fl-
of caster sugar
leave for two w-
One part lavender
sugar is a good

— To make an
crunchy flavo-
topping for ice-
make a caramel
lavender is ad-
poured into a
lined tray and
and become cr-
to a coarse por-
kitchen ham-
blender, sprin-
lavender, sprin-

Lavender Yogurt Cheesecake

Serves four-six

ENERGY	FAT	SFA
438	36	21
kcal	grams	grams

A simple and delightful summer cheesecake, where the lavender biscuit base adds a touch of summer elegance. Kaffir lime leaves are available from Oriental grocers and larger supermarkets

50g / 1½oz unsalted butter
 ½ tsp lavender flowers, finely crushed
 115g / 4oz sweet digestive biscuits, finely crushed
 4 tbsp caster sugar
 250g / 9oz good quality cream cheese
 250ml / 9fl oz thick set natural yogurt
 175ml / 6fl oz double cream

For the strawberries
 125g / 4½oz caster sugar
 6 kaffir lime leaves, torn (optional)
 Zest and juice of 2 limes
 225g / 8oz strawberries, hulled and halved

Melt the butter in a pan, add the lavender flowers and remove from the heat, stir in the crushed biscuit and half of sugar and mix together. While still warm, press the biscuit into the base of a flan ring. Refrigerate for an hour to set. You don't need to cook it.

In a bowl, cream the cream cheese, remaining sugar and yogurt until smooth. In another bowl, whip the double cream until half whipped and just holding its shape, then gently fold into the yogurt mixture until amalgamated. Spread the mixture over the lavender biscuit base and smooth over the surface with a

palette knife. Return to the refrigerator for an hour or until ready to serve.

For the strawberries, bring the sugar and 150ml (½pt) water to the boil slowly, raise the heat to a simmer. Add the kaffir leaves if using for two minutes to form a lime syrup. Add the lime zest and juice and kaffir leaves. Put the strawberries in a bowl, pour the hot lime syrup over, leave to cool. Cut the cheesecake into wedges and garnish with the strawberry sauce and serve.



