

New Zealand Named Lavender Cultivars: The Advantages and Disadvantages

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INTRODUCTION

Lavender! It is probably one of the most versatile herbs to grace our gardens. New Zealand has proved an ideal climate for growing many different lavenders, with the exception of extremely cold areas, as some species are frost tender. A revived interest in ornamental planting, cottage gardens, and formal gardens has led to an increase in breeding of lavenders for the domestic market.

I would like to mention some of the New Zealand named cultivars which, either because of their distinguishing characteristics have become popular, or probably will become popular with the public.

NEW ZEALAND CULTIVARS

Section Stoechas. Some of these plants have characteristics similar to *Lavandula stoechas* ssp. *stoechas* and some to *L. stoechas* ssp. *pedunculata*.

***Lavandula* ‘Evelyn Cadzow’.** A very attractive low-growing (20 to 30 cm) shrub, quite bushy in habit with one of its most distinguishing features being its bright green foliage. The flower spikes are 10 to 20 mm long excluding the sterile bracts.

Their shape is round and plump and the 12-, to 14-mm sterile bracts are reddish purple in colour (71A with a little 77A, RHS colour charts) and very striking. Fertile bracts are reddish-purple and green and corollas a very dark purple. Peduncles vary from 2 to 8 cm in length. Overall the plant looks like a miniature version of *L. stoechas* ssp. *pedunculata*, except that the foliage and spikes make a wonderful contrast and create a striking appearance which is very popular with the public.

***Lavandula* ‘Marshwood’.** A very large, upright-growing shrub that can easily reach 80 cm at maturity. It gives a bold appearance and is suitable for mass plantings, borders, etc. The foliage is greyish-green and the peduncles are long (13 to 15 cm) and noticeably hairy, particularly under the spikes. The sterile bracts are 2 to 5 cm long (77A - 77B, RHS colour charts) corollas are dark purple and fertile bracts green tinged with burgundy-purple. The overall spikes are quite long and impressive but the sterile bracts do fade in colour with age.

***Lavandula* ‘Helmsdale’.** The habit of this plant is more bushy with medium to long peduncles and greyish-green foliage making it a very attractive hedging plant (50 to 60 cm). The flower spikes give the overall impression of being burgundy in colour although the fertile bracts are actually green with purple tips. The sterile bracts are an attractive burgundy colour.

***Lavandula* ‘Plum’.** For such an uninteresting name, this medium sized plant compensates by being attractive in all areas. In flower it reaches 50 cm and will produce abundant spikes throughout the growing season. The spikes are composed of dark purple corollas which contrast significantly with the reddish-purple sterile

bracts (72A, RHS colour charts). The growth habit is bushy and the foliage is delicate with leaves much shorter in length than most of the other cultivars. However, the plant is very robust and is also a favourite with those who see it.

***Lavandula* 'Avonview'**. A rather striking plant displaying vigorous upright growth, easily reaching 60 cm in height in a short space of time. One of its most distinguishing features is its long, broad sterile bracts (77A with touch of 80A, RHS colours charts), and large impressive spikes. The corollas are dark purple and the fertile bracts are purple with a splash of green up the centre. Peduncles are long.

***Lavandula* 'Pippa'**. An unusual plant in that the spikes tend to change colour as they age. At night the flower heads can also tend to look a little luminescent as well. The growth habit is upright and vigorous, easily reaching 60 cm. The sterile bracts are purple (79B - D, RHS colour charts) with dark purple corollas and green fertile bracts tinged with reddish veining.

***Lavandula* 'Pippa White'**. A spectacular flowering plant of sprawling habit which tends to attract much attention and has a tendency to become a conversation piece in the garden. The peduncles are 6 to 8 cm long and noticeably hairy. Spikes are long with many being over 7 cm in length, with purple corollas and green fertile bracts. The sterile bracts are a creamy-white with green and yellow veining. Foliage is greenish-grey.

***Lavandula* 'Pukehou'**. Foliage is greyish-green and the growth habit is bushy. The peduncle length varies between 6 to 14 cm with medium-length spikes with purple fertile bracts, dark purple corollas and long attractive purple sterile bracts (83C - 83D, RHS colour charts).

***Lavandula* 'Willowbridge White'**. This plant is more like *L. stoechas* ssp. *stoechas* in form and habit. The most noticeable difference being the flower spikes which combine dark purple corollas with white sterile bracts. 'Willowbridge White' is currently being tested through Plant Variety Rights in New Zealand.

Section Spica. These are just a few of the plants available on the New Zealand market.

***Lavandula angustifolia* 'Blue Mountain'**. A striking grey foliated plant, 50 to 60 cm in height with medium-length spikes. Corollas are a deep violet (dark 88A, RHS colour charts) and calyces are also very dark (86A with a tinge of blue, RHS colour charts) giving the flower heads an overall dark violet appearance. A most attractive plant which lends itself to many uses, its primary ones being more as a foliage plant and cut flower rather than for oil. It is probably one of the most appropriate lavenders in this group to be used as hedging because of its vigorous compact growth habit.

***Lavandula angustifolia* 'Avice Hill'**. A grey-foliaged plant which, although slower growing when young, forms a lovely compact bush at maturity. One of the features of this plant is its unusual scent, which is very sweet and slightly different from some other lavenders in this group. It also has a tendency to flower all summer, producing masses of heads for a *L. angustifolia* cultivar. Flower spikes are very uniform with large violet corollas (88A - 88B, RHS colour charts), dark violet and green calyces (86A, RHS colour charts) and broad green fertile bracts.

***Lavandula angustifolia* 'Pacific Blue'**. This plant was grown initially by Crop and Food Research to assess its oil-producing qualities. Formerly known as *L. angustifolia* '565/6' it has been given a new lease of life as 'Pacific Blue'. Foliage is greyish-green and the bright blue spikes are medium to long. Flower heads are suitable for cutting.

***L. xintermedia* 'Impress Purple'**. Also grown by Crop and Food Research to assess oil-producing qualities and formerly known as *L. xintermedia* '41/70'. The habit of the plant is bushy with grey foliage and long, frequently branched peduncles which have a tendency to sprawl. Spikes are short to medium length with large violet corollas (88A, RHS colour charts) and lighter coloured calyces. Long bracteoles are present and fertile bracts are also long and narrow. Overall the spikes have quite a dark appearance for a lavandin and they make attractive cut flowers. The scent is camphoraceous. This plant is sometimes mistakenly sold under the name *L. xintermedia* 'Arabian Night'.

Most of these plants are reasonably frost hardy (depending on where they are grown) and are all suitable ornamental plants.

There is, however, a cautionary note with this tale and one which I am sure you have all heard before, since it does not just apply to lavenders.

Lavender is a highly promiscuous plant and tends to hybridise freely within sections with intersectional crosses being rare. In latter times, people excited by the prospect of selling something "new" on the market have been giving names to such seedlings without knowing the full story. Many similar, if not the same seedlings, will arise spontaneously in different gardens and are often brought to me for comparison. Because of this, I feel we need to be careful about what we are naming and be very selective in this process. The public will soon tire of similar plants on the market! Such a situation has not only created confusion amongst the public but also amongst the nurserymen and further complicates an already confused genus.

One example of this are two subspecies of *L. stoechas* which, in my opinion, should never have been released onto the market. These are *L. stoechas* ssp. *sampaioana* and *L. stoechas* ssp. *luisieri*, the naming of which for some reason has been mixed up at the source level. It may take some time to unravel the problem, by which time further damage will have been created by releasing these plants in New Zealand. Once on the open market, these plants can be distributed world wide which will ultimately lead to further confusion at a species level. At present there is a genetic analysis being made to determine the difference in lavenders from the Iberian Peninsula and I would prefer to wait until such research was complete before seeing such plants widely available.

However, in the meantime, I have no doubt that new cultivars will continue to appear on the market especially as New Zealand has the ideal climate and a wide genetic base from which to choose. The decision of naming new cultivars will be left to the discerning nurseryman and the Plant Variety Rights Office and as long as some of the above mentioned points are kept in mind, then the future of lavender breeding in New Zealand is a promising one.