Two Lavender Hybrids That Will Grow on the Middle Peninsula

By Susan Camp

My earliest foray into gardening included growing herbs in small pots on the kitchen windowsill. Later, I expanded to larger pots on the deck, and then to a raised bed outside the kitchen door. I still grow herbs in a raised bed, but years ago, I began to incorporate various herbs into the perennial beds. Two massive rosemaries (Salvia Rosmarinus-- synonym Rosmarinus officinalis) are competing to see which one can block the front garden walkway most effectively. A huge patch of Greek oregano ((Origanum vulgare sub. hirtum) has been spreading its spicy fragrance in the garden for at least ten years, and English and lemon thyme (Thymus spp.) serve as edging for some of the perennial beds. Finally, a sage (Salvia officinalis 'Berggarten') outgrew its space in the front garden, and I had to move it to the raised bed to prevent it from crowding out the smaller perennials.

But I couldn't grow lavender. I planted various cultivars of English (Lavandula angustifolia), French (L. dentata) and even tried Spanish lavender (L. stoechas), which froze the first winter. The other lavenders would struggle on for a year or two, but all of them eventually died.

About 10 years ago, I read about an English lavender hybrid, L. angustifolia 'Platinum Blonde™,' and decided to give it a try. I only planted one, and it thrived in a bed with English thyme, lemon balm, and yarrow. This lovely lavender survived for about four years before succumbing to cold winter weather.

'Platinum Blonde™' grows to 16 to 24 inches at maturity with a spread of 16-18 inches. The variegated foliage with creamy yellow leaf margins surrounding light green centers provides striking contrast to the deep blue-purple flowers. The classic fragrance is pleasing without being overpowering. I didn't replant 'Platinum Blonde™,' but I certainly would try growing it again.

Four years ago, I discovered Lavandula x intermedia 'Grosso,' also called 'Fat Spike' because of its large, thick flower spikes. Not a very attractive name for a beautiful plant, but this hybrid's performance more than makes up for its name. 'Grosso' is a lavandin, a hybrid of L. angustifolia and L. latifolia, which is known as Portuguese lavender. Other lavandin hybrids you may recognize include 'Provence' and 'Hidcote Giant.'

Of the lavandins, 'Grosso' possesses the most powerful fragrance and the most robust appearance. 'Grosso' is a semi-woody perennial with a mounding habit. It reaches a mature height of 2 to 3 feet with a similar spread. The gray-green leaves showcase the long, plump lavender flower spikes. We purchased five 'Grosso' lavandins last year, and are adding seven more this spring.

I want to share with you a few possible reasons for my lavender failures over the years. First and foremost, lavenders are primarily Mediterranean plants that require more alkaline soil than we find on the Middle Peninsula. If you grow lavender in pots or raised beds, you may be able to better regulate the soil pH. Secondly, lavenders require full sun and dry, well-drained soil. Too

much water can cause root rot. Some cultivars and hybrids thrive in sandy soil with low fertility. Next, not all lavenders will be cold hardy to our climate, so always check the USDA Hardiness Zone for the lavender cultivars or hybrids you plan to purchase. Some may grow better in pots that are taken inside for the winter.

Finally, research pruning times and techniques for your lavenders. Many online articles are vague about pruning lavender. In general, prune lavenders in early spring and lightly after they flower to promote rebloom. Do not cut into woody stems. YouTube videos can be helpful.

Find information on lavenders and lavandins in the Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder and the NCSU Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox. Labeling on lavender and other plants may be incorrect or unintentionally misleading, so always search by the botanical name. Go shopping prepared with the exact name of the plant you hope to purchase.