



BETWEEN
THE ROWS
WENDY SCHMIDT

Lavender: It's more than just a pretty color

Lavendula labiatae — lavender:
Evergreen shrubs or sub-shrubs native to the Mediterranean region. Prized for lavender or purple flowers used for perfumes, sachets, and to a lesser extent in herbal remedies and flavorings.

Gray or gray-green aromatic foliage prized as a border plant with plants needing similar conditions (cistus, nepeta, santolina, verbenas, and helianthemum). Somewhat drought-tolerant. Requiring a well-drained soil of sand, gravel, or sandy loam or a mixture of these as well as full sun. If you over-fertilize lavender it tends to be less fragrant and have fewer flowers. Meager conditions of benign neglect tend to suit the lavender.

- ENGLISH LAVENDER: L. angustifolia (L. officinalis, L. spica, L. vera) — classic lavender. This is the kind most widely planted and used for perfume and sachet. Smooth gray narrow 2-inch leaves. Flowers on 1½- to 2-foot-spikes in July-August. 'Munstead' and 'Compacta' are the two most common dwarf forms. Purple flowers are attractive to bees.
- FRENCH LAVENDER: L. dentata — gray-green narrow leaves with square toothed edges. Lavender purple flowers in short spikelike clusters topped with tuft of petal-like bracts. In mild-winter areas, blooms almost continually.
- SPANISH LAVENDER: L. stoechas — narrow gray leaves ½- to 1-inch long. Flowers dark purple, about 1/8-inch long in dense short spikes topped with tuft of large, purple, petal-like bracts. Blooms early summer.
- SPIKE LAVENDER: L. latifolia — much like English lavender in appearance, but with broader leaves and flower stalks frequently branched.

An interesting note about lavender and spike lavender is found in "A Modern Herbal" by Mrs. M. Grieve, 1971, Dover Books.

"Parkinson in his Garden of Pleasure says the L. spica is often called the Lesser Lavender or minor, and is called by some, Nardus Italica. Some believe that this is the Spikenard mentioned in the Bible."

"History. Dr. Fernie, in Herbal Simples, says: 'By the Greeks the name Nardus is given to Lavender, from Naarda, a city of Syria near the Euphrates, and many persons call the plant "Nard." St. Mark mentions this as Spikenard, a thing of great value... In Pliny's time, blossoms of the Nardus sold for a hundred Roman denarii the pound. This Lavender or Nardus was called Asarum by the Romans, because it was not used in garlands or chaplets."

- WHITE LAVENDER: L. delphinensis — one of the two forms of French lavender. This one yielding the highest number of esters for use in oil. This form of lavender is more rare and is difficult to propagate. The white flowers are thought to be a form of albinism. Queen Henrietta Maria is said to have grown white lavender.
- GROWING LAVENDER IS NOT DIFFICULT. Light soil with perfect drainage, freedom from dampness, especially in the winter, and a sunny location and never or nearly never fertilize it. Water with discretion, but don't forget it entirely.
- PROPAGATION: you can grow lavender from seeds or cuttings or divisions when a friend may share part of their plant with you. Cuttings in potting soil is the way nurseries propagate lavender.

Homemade Soft Pretzels



Hillary Levin/St. Louis Post Dispatch-TNS

Homemade Auntie Anne type pretzels.

TIED UP IN KNOTS

By Daniel Neman
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

To lye or not to lye? That is the question when you're making pretzels.

On the one hand, lye gives pretzels their distinctive flavor, kind of a sharp flatness, if that makes sense. It's what keeps a pretzel from tasting like pretzel-shaped bread.

On the other hand, lye is ridiculously dangerous. It will burn you if it gets on your skin and blind you if it gets in your eyes. And if you happen to eat it, it can kill you.

That could scare some people, considering that pretzels are generally eaten.

Lye is also used for unclogging drains. It is used to strip paint. And if you're a gangster with a body that needs to disappear, it can be used for that, too.

So obviously it should be avoided at all costs. Except for that part about it making pretzels taste so good.

As a culinary experiment, I tried making pretzels both ways, with and without lye. And then I tried it a third way, too: making the kind of pretzel that you get at a mall.

You could argue that Auntie Anne pretzels aren't pretzels at all, they are dessert. And you would be right. But they look like pretzels and they call themselves pretzels (or at least the store calls them pretzels), so I made them out of the spirit of fair play.

Besides, who doesn't like dessert?

I tried the pretzels with lye first; the recipe calls them German Soft Pretzels. I will be honest with you: I was not entirely happy with the way they looked. They tasted fine — even great. But I had a couple of problems with them, even though I tried them twice.

One problem was that you dip the pretzels into very hot water with lye in it, and the water (or perhaps the lye) tends to make the dough fall apart and lose its distinctive shape.

The other problem is that the pretzels did not brown as much as I thought they would or should. A solution of lye in water is supposed to give pretzels their characteristic chestnut color, but mine instead were merely tawny. That is probably because I did not dip them long enough; however, the longer I dipped them the more likely they were to fall apart.

One problem I did not have was that I poisoned anybody. I made a solution of one teaspoon of lye dissolved into one cup of water, which is a perfectly safe ratio of 1:24. Even so, I did not touch the dough with my hands after it had been dipped.

The taste was perfect. They tasted like pretzels.

Next up was pretzels made without lye, which are called Homemade Soft Pretzels. These came from a recipe by Alton Brown, who is usually pretty good with such things.

With this thing, he is excellent.

For one, he adds extra calories to the pretzels in the form of melted butter, which is never a bad thing when it comes to baked



Hillary Levin/St. Louis Post Dispatch-TNS

German soft pretzels.

goods. He also includes a tablespoon of sugar for eight large pretzels; although the sugar is just there to feed and activate the yeast, it is nonetheless a tablespoon of sugar.

This dough is a little less stiff than the one I used to make the pretzels with lye. It also only rises once, which saves time, and it has the lovely brown color that I couldn't get with the lye.

How? By dipping them in a solution of hot water and a lot of baking soda.

Baking soda is highly alkaline, though not nearly as alkaline as lye; it is that property that has the browning effect on the outside of a pretzel. It also affects the way it tastes, though because baking soda is not as strong

as lye, its effect is not as pronounced.

Still, it's an awfully good pretzel. Try it with mustard.

Finally, I made a knock-off of an Auntie Anne's pretzel. Admittedly, it does not taste exactly the same as the mall pretzels, but as knock-offs go, it's certainly close enough.

Several factors distinguish it from pretzels that are stouter, more traditional and less dessert. For one, it is made with a blend of bread flour and all-purpose flour, which should actually make it chewier than other, all-purpose-only pretzels, but somehow it doesn't.