

# For love of lavender

Thanks to a community project, an area of London once known as the 'lavender capital of the world' is seeing a lavender revival. **Louisa Alessandra Pini** explains



It is hard to believe that the suburbs of London, namely Mitcham, Hackbridge, Beddington, Wallington, Carshalton and Sutton, used to be a sea of lavender.

The earliest record of lavender growing in the area dates back to 1301 (Heales 1898) but it was not until the 18th and 19th centuries that these areas of south west London emerged as leading suppliers of lavender products.

The Potter and Moore company, founded in 1749 by Ephraim Potter and William Moore, signalled the beginning of the golden age of lavender. The partners set up a distillery in Eveline Road, Mitcham, overlooking a green area now called Figges Marsh, where they produced Mitcham Lavender water and also extracted lavender essential oil.

The business grew and flourished, achieving worldwide renown, especially under the leadership of James Moore, William's grandson. He bought up much of the surrounding land so that, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he owned more than 500 acres of land growing lavender and peppermint, which at that time was the larger crop. He also grew roses, and herbs such as chamomile, spearmint and pennyroyal.

In the mid-1800s landowner William Sprules owned lavender fields spanning the areas of Cheam, Sutton, and Beddington, and distilled lavender essential oil at Hackbridge Mill, near Sutton. His daughter Sarah, who took over the business, was, by special appointment, 'Purveyor of Lavender Essence to the Queen' (Miller & Miller 1908), and is remembered walking through her fields with Queen Victoria.

Lavender essential oil is often associated with France so it's amazing to discover the thriving industry that took place so close to the city of London. According to Sally Festing, who has written extensively about lavender, "during the 19<sup>th</sup> century English Lavender commanded a much higher price: 'as much shillings an ounce as the French oil is worth per pound'" (Festing 1989) which equates to sixteen times the value.

Lavender has always been popular with English royalty. Queen Victoria was a huge fan, "The royal residences are strongly impregnated with the refreshing



*This cart, a replica of those used by 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century lavender sellers, welcomes visitors to the Carshalton field*

odour of this old-fashioned flower" (McDonald 1894). Queen Elizabeth I demanded fresh lavender flowers every day and is said to have used it to help quell her headaches. The popularity of lavender at the time may also have increased due to its strong perfume which would help mask unpleasant smells caused by the lack of a sewage system.

In my aromatherapy training I learned that 'Lavender' comes from the Latin word *lavare*, meaning to wash. It derives from a Latin word because the Romans used lavender in their baths in the belief that it would restore their skin.

Interestingly, 16<sup>th</sup> century herbalist William Turner has a slightly different explanation in his book *A New Herball*, published in 1551. He suggests it was “because wyse men founde by experience that it was good to washe mennis heades with, which had anye deceases there in”.

Sally Festing, in her fascinating book *A Story of Lavender*, comments that “an early Victorian doctor argued that its earliest spelt form was *livendula*, which was more likely to be connected with the Latin *livere* – to be livid or bluish”.

Nevertheless, lavender has always been associated with cleanliness. Aside from its uses in perfumery and cleansing, many herbalists have recorded its multiple therapeutic properties.

### Species and properties

All lavenders belong to the genus *Lavandula* in the family Lamiaceae and there are over 20 different lavender species. Common lavenders are all believed to derive from two species: *Lavandula angustifolia* (True Lavender) and *Lavandula latifolia* (Spike Lavender).

Many of the therapeutic properties of these two lavender genera overlap but there is one distinct difference. Spike Lavender contains the ketone camphor, making it an excellent mucolytic, ideal to help treat catarrh and chesty coughs. However, it is advisable to avoid its use during pregnancy or for those with epilepsy, due to the ketone content.

The hybrid *Lavandula x intermedia*, known as Lavandin, is the result of combining the above two genera.

Lavandin inherits a balance of the therapeutic properties of *Lavandula angustifolia* and *Lavandula latifolia*. Its scent falls in between the sweetness of True Lavender and the slightly more camphorous Spike Lavender.

There was never one single variety of “Carshalton Lavender” or ‘Mitcham Lavender’. There were probably many and these have no doubt changed over time due to cross pollination” (Festing 1989 & Vickers 1991).

### Lavender revival

By 1910 there was just one lavender grower left in Mitcham, a Mr Henry Fowler of Bond Road Nursery. In the 1920s the last lavender fields of Carshalton were sold to the London County Council for housing.

Fast forward over seventy years and you will be pleased to hear that Victorian lavender is once more alive and growing in Carshalton on one of the original lavender fields.

In 1996, the Local Lavender Scheme was established



Volunteers hard at work on the lavender harvest. Photo: A Duncan

on the site by local environmental charity BioRegional, with the London Borough of Sutton, Downview Prison and sponsorship from several sources. The scheme aimed to restore the world-famous lavender industry of Carshalton and Mitcham.

Three acres of disused land were identified for planting with *Lavandula x intermedia*. Research was undertaken and cuttings collected from the gardens of local residents. These cuttings are believed to be lavender from the original fields in the area. The cuttings were grown on through a horticulture project within HMP Downview. After two to three years, the lavender was



After 80 years lavender is once again harvested, using traditional methods, on an original lavender field. Photo: Photocraft Camera Club, Wallington



Top: Lavender essential oil distilled from the Carshalton crop. Below: The product range includes lavender essential oil, lavender hydrosol and dried lavender sachets

ready for planting. Low-risk prisoners on day-release worked with staff from BioRegional to clear the site and plant the lavender.

In 1997, the field was initially planted with 8902 young lavender cuttings. After patiently waiting and nurturing the cuttings the first lavender harvest in 80 years, using traditional hand harvesting methods, took place on Friday, 9 July 1999. Lavender bunches were sold locally and the remaining lavender was sent elsewhere to be distilled. Proceeds from the sale of lavender bunches and oil were re-invested in the scheme to keep it going.

In 2001, an engineering team from Cranfield University led by Dr James Brighton, consultant engineer to Channel 4's *Scrapheap Challenge and Junkyard Wars*, created the Heritage Harvester from second-hand agricultural machines, a rotator and a quad bike. This made it easier to harvest narrow rows of lavender without damaging the plants. The Heritage Harvester was used at the one of the scheme's first community harvests.

In 2003 the scheme came to be known as Carshalton Lavender and has continued to be run under that name by a team of volunteers ever since.

In 2009 the project received a grant from the Thames Community Foundation which enabled them to purchase

a still so that the essential oil and hydrosol could be distilled on site.

## Annual harvest

The annual harvest that takes place on last weekend of July every year has continued to grow in popularity. It's become one of South London's best-kept secrets and the only Pick Your Own Lavender harvest in the area. Visitors can walk among the lavender and cut and pick as much as they wish. Scissors and buckets are provided. Any lavender picked is paid for on exit and all proceeds from the harvest weekend are used to fund the project.

Visitors have the rare opportunity to watch lavender being harvested with a Japanese tea cutter – this turned out to be a lighter and easier option than the Heritage Harvester. They can also see oil distillation demonstrations and, of course, they have an opportunity to purchase Carshalton Heritage Lavender essential oil and hydrosol, and dried lavender sachets.

This year Carshalton Lavender celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> annual community Pick Your Own Harvest and the event was opened by well-known horticulturalist, Jim Buttress.

As a not-for-profit project Carshalton Lavender relies solely on volunteers to manage the field throughout the year. The project welcomes groups of volunteers which include company volunteering days or a group of young people supported by the National Citizen Service.

Volunteering sessions open to everyone take place regularly every Saturday morning from 10.15am until 12.30pm throughout the year. Volunteers tackle a variety of seasonal tasks involved in managing the field including taking cuttings, planting lavender, pruning, weeding, harvesting, drying lavender, fostering cuttings at home and returning them to the field for planting – to name just a few! Carshalton Lavender welcomes new volunteers.

To find out more about the revival of Carshalton Lavender and its unique essential oil and hydrosol visit [www.carshaltonlavender.org](http://www.carshaltonlavender.org) or Facebook: CarshaltonLavender. It is also worth mentioning that there are two lavender fields in the area and the other one is a commercial enterprise. Carshalton Lavender is tucked away within the Stanley Road allotments and you access it via Oaks Way, Carshalton, Surrey, SM5 4NQ.

## References

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