Is there a plant that can take the Texas heat, thrive on neglect, survive drought, and deter the hungriest deer? If you think such a plant must surely be made of plastic, think again. It is lavender, not plastic.

Lavender, one of the most fragrant members of the herb family, is ideally suited for what a Texas summer has to offer. And some cold hardy varieties can withstand a Texas winter. Cultivars of English lavender (the species L. augustifolia) are the most winter hardy of the lavenders and can survive colder temperatures. In this group, varieties include plants with white and pink blooms as well as over 50 varieties with traditional purple, violet, or lavender blooms, such as Buena Vista, Hidcote, Munstead, and Provencal.

Other than good drainage, lavenders have few requirements. They prefer poor or rocky soil and flourish in full sun. Once established, they need very little water. The planting area should provide good air circulation, and they should be pruned after they bloom. They require no fertilizer or organic mulch. Instead, use pea gravel, decomposed granite, or sand. A sloping spot in a rock garden could be ideal for these hardy plants.

The reward for this investment in neglect is tremendous because lavender provides one of the loveliest fragrances in any garden. Lavender takes its name from the Latin word "lavare," which means "to wash." Its essential oil has long been valued for its fragrance. Most varieties bloom in late May or early June, and some plants bloom again in the fall. The flowers can be easily cut and included in fresh bouquets or dried by hanging upside down to retain the most color. Dried blossoms can be used to fragrance soap, bath salts, sachets, and potpourri.

Lavender buds can also be used in cooking to add a slightly sweet flavor to breads, cakes, ice cream, and lemonade. The 7th annual Lavender Festival in Blanco will feature both lavender products and food. It is held the second weekend in June. The festival includes free tours of lavender farms that have been established there since the first commercial lavender farm in the state, including Hill Country Lavender, started near Blanco.

Closer to home, Bridsong Lavender Farm in Troy will be open to visitors May 20, 21, and 22. The hours on Friday and Saturday are from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. On Sunday the hours are 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Events include a soap making demonstration and a talk on the distillation process by a distiller from Marble Falls.

Have any questions about gardening in Central Texas? Contact ask.bcmga@gmail.com