



Sage Advice

by Sue Crawford, UC Master Gardener (retired)

The author Zane Grey immortalized the common garden plant, sage, in his 1912 classic, *Riders of the Purple Sage*. On further inspection, we'll find that sage is well worthy of this accolade.

Salvia is the genus name for sage and belongs in the mint botanical family (Lamiaceae) along with catnip, lavender, marjoram, peppermint and dozens of aromatic herbs. Salvias are abundant worldwide and may be annuals or perennials that grow like shrubs or groundcovers. Flower colors range from white and yellow through pink to scarlet, from pale lavender to true blue and dark purple. Many salvias are aromatic, some sweetly scented others more intense, and many are edible comprising mainstays on the kitchen spice rack.



Purple sage provides contrast with the red and yellow blanketflower

The genus boasts more than one hundred species and hybrids with different characteristics. The traditional culinary and medicinal plant is called garden (or common) sage (*S. officinalis*). Some salvias have hairy leaves, some smooth. Some spread by underground stems or runners such as germander sage (*S. chamaedryoides*). Some have gray-green leaves such as California blue sage (*S. clevelandii*), while others have yellow-green, green, black-green, bicolor and tricolor variegated foliage such as *S. officinalis* tricolor.

Some sage plants are small only reaching 6 to 12 inches in height such as Sinaloa sage (*S. sinaloensis*) and some are big growing 4 to 7 feet tall such as Mexican bush sage (*S. leucantha*). Some are edible such as common garden sage, pineapple sage and honey melon sage.

Plants with a marvelous fragrance are *S. clevelandii*, a 4-foot shrub and *S. elegans*, the edible pineapple sage. Common sage, clary sage (*S. sclarea*) and bog sage (*S. uginosa*) are also highly aromatic. Plant them near a walkway so that their fragrance is released when brushed in passing. You'll find they become more pungent if their environment is kept a little dry.



Close up of sage flower spike

Salvia flowers are arranged in whorls of two-lipped flowers that are either distinctly spaced along a flower stalk or are so tightly crowded that they appear to be in one dense cluster (spike). They are almost always blooming and their flowers attract butterflies and hummingbirds. Bees like to gather their nectar.

In recent years salvia availability has exploded in the nurseries. They can be purchased in seed packets, as small seedlings and as plants in 5-gallon pots. Sages are so easy to grow that tiny plants rapidly develop into mature size under proper conditions. A good choice for children to grow because they are nontoxic, fast growing, quite forgiving, if a bit neglected and relatively inexpensive.

Depending on the species, salvias require full sun or part shade, may be evergreen or deciduous and need regular water or become drought tolerant once established. Some require pruning in winter when dormant. One fact holds true for all: few insects bother the salvias.

If you've tried salvias and they've failed, then perhaps your soil needs better drainage. Salvias don't like wet feet. It's better to deep soak every few weeks than to water every other day. Also don't let salvias grow wild on you and if they do, resist the urge to prune heavily during the growing season. Instead shape them as they grow by either tip pinching the shoots or cutting them back by less than one-third, keeping as many leaves on the stems as possible.

Whatever garden requirement you have, there's a salvia with a perfect fit. Sunset's Western Garden Book details salvias, listing scientific and common names, zone, growth habit, flowers and basic comments for each. With names like royal purple, scarlet, purple majesty, Phyllis' Fancy, Mark's Mystery, forsythia, grape-scented, peach, roseleaf, and Costa Rica blue, how could you not want to try a few?

Remember, you don't have to be a sage to grow a sage!

May 3, 2012