

For the Love of Salvias

By Rachel Oppedahl

My new favorite garden plants have it all: long-blooming flowers, heavenly scented foliage; drought tolerance once established; disease and insect resistance. Plus, the deer don't touch them, while the bees, hummers and butterflies love them. If that weren't enough, the leaves of some varieties are a yummy culinary—and some say medicinal—herb. This garden beauty is *saliva*, better known as sage.

I said my new favorite garden “plants” in the beginning because *salvia* appears in so many sizes, shapes and colors. It is the most numerous genus in the mint family, with over 900 species worldwide. The plant is native to the Mediterranean, but has naturalized all over the world. About 100 species can be found in the U.S. and Mexico. The genus includes evergreen and deciduous perennials, biennials and annuals that come in creeping ground covers, small mounding plants, and medium to large bushes. Many are perennials, which mean if they are sited properly, they will delight year after year with little help from humans.

The individual flowers of salvia are quite small, but they are abundant. My “Hot Lips” sage, *S. microphylla*, a rounded shrub about four feet tall and wide, is covered in teensy red and white flowers spring through fall. *S. spathica*, on the other hand, is one of the many varieties whose flowers cluster into tall, spiky, dramatic blooms. Speaking of flowers, the range of color in the genus is amazing, from lavender to purple, magenta, red, pink, yellow, white and even cobalt blue, a rare flower color in nature. *Salvia*’s size and texture varies, too. My Hot Lips’ leaves are small, medium green and arrow-shaped; whereas my diminutive “germander sage” (*S. chamaedryoides*), at about eight inches tall, has small, soft grey fragrant leaves that are a beautiful compliment to the cobalt blue flowers. *S. elegans*, or “pineapple sage,” has leaves that smell exactly like pineapple!

Most *salvias* prefer full sun, infrequent but deep watering, and good drainage. Many are easy to propagate from seed or cuttings. I have read that *salvias* resent hard pruning, so for my “Allen Chickering” (*S. clevelandii*) sage that is less compact than the others in the garden, I cut back about a third each fall to keep it from looking rank.

While most sages available in nurseries are hardy through the foothills winter, some are not, so do a little research before buying. After being bowled over by the lush, purple-flowered Mexican sage (*S. leucantha*) at the San Francisco Arboretum, I tried twice to grow this stunning small bush. Both times, my 2,800-foot elevation proved to be too much for this species in winter.

If you’re most interested in culinary sage, look to “garden sage” or “common sage,” *S. officinalis*, for the herb we love in turkey dressing and soups. It is an extremely hardy species that can be grown from Sunset zones 2 to 24. It grows from one- to three-feet high and almost as wide, and while the flowers are typically lavender, you can also find them in red, pink and white. For another taste treat, try growing *S. hispanica*, which produces the chia seeds so popular in recent years in Paleo and other healthy diet plans.

There are some *salvias* that are native to California, but they are difficult to find in nurseries, especially in the big-box stores. Look to the California Native Plant Society (cnps.org) for advice in finding them.

Salvias are a fabulous addition to a water-wise garden. They are easy to grow, require little maintenance and pair beautifully with other hardy perennials. And with about 100 different species found in North America, a sage-obsessed gardener could spend a lifetime collecting them!

Rachel Oppedahl is a University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener of Tuolumne County who has already become obsessed with salvias.