



Salvia & Sage: Nature's Elixir of Health

by Penye Cushing, UC Master Gardener



Renovating a front yard, I fell in love with a wonderful smelling shrub in a myriad of colors ranging from white and yellow, blue and purple, to shades of pink and red. Even better, the foliage ranged from large leaves to small, dull to shiny, fuzzy to smooth, and in tones of gray through dark green. Each plant had a plant name tag of either Sage or Salvia. I did my planting homework, but found I wanted to learn more about their use and why they had different names but seemed so similar.

Salvia is a member of the large Mint family of plants encompassing nearly 1,000 shrubs, perennials and annuals. The ornamental species are commonly called Salvia. The cooking or medicinal plant is generally called sage, although its Latin name is *Salvia*. All sages are salvias!

Sages have been part of our history since the written word. Most varieties are native to the Mediterranean and Asia Minor. Plants were carried to Central Europe in the Middle Ages and immigrants from Europe brought them to America. A few varieties of sage came from Central America and Mexico. Salvia was first recorded in Western literature in 1939 by Mr. Jean Basset Johnson whose research showed the ancient Aztec Indians had used it for healing, vision interpretation and prophecy. This particular plant, *Salvia divinorum*, is now being researched for assistance with diseases of schizophrenia and dementia.

Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and almost every culture of the world cultivated sage for culinary and medicinal use. Sage was used in ancient Greece for digesting fatty foods, tummy aches, tooth polish and flavoring meat. Charlemagne's people blended a sage tea with honey and vinegar to make an effective mouth wash to mitigate the tooth infections that plagued people in the past. Sage is even an ingredient in some of today's mouth washes!

Culinary sage teams up with foods rich in oils and fat. It is not just a Thanksgiving herb--it's peppery-rosemary flavor is useful year-round. When shopping for fresh sage look for tender-firm leaves with a downy coating and no brown spots.

Sage pairs well with dairy and cheese, so add a bit to your next grilled cheese sandwich. Sauté it with onions, caramelize, then use to top a pizza. Sausages and beer are Germany's great treat and you can add caramelized sage onions to a grilled sausage sandwich. Yum! Add sage to browned butter over pasta. Make a pesto out of sage, toasted walnuts, lemon juice, and soft goat cheese. Add this to a ham sandwich...Oh Joy!! Try roasting cauliflower florets tossed



with melted butter, chopped fresh sage, cooked penne, shredded cheese and an egg. Spoon all into a loaf pan, bake for about 30 minutes. Cook slightly then slice. OK to add ham if you'd like.

Sage mixed with hummus. Sage and apple or pineapple. With butter in gnocchi, ravioli (especially pumpkin), or in bean dishes! There are so many ways to try sage in your cooking.

Ornamental salvias come in flowering or non-bloomers. Resembling mint, the stems are square and silvery with lance-shaped leaves. Depending on its variety, it can grow one or two feet tall, to eight or ten! Pollinators such as hummingbirds or bees love the trumpet-shaped blooms of blue, red, pink, purple, or bicolor orange and yellow.

Generally, most salvia need minimal water and soil that drains well. They love living here in our Central Valley. The only complaint a salvia will have is they don't like wet feet!

Look up your individual plant for directions on nipping back after first bloom. Generally, it is best to cut back about a third of the plant. Remove the spent blooms after flowering for more growth and rebloom. Salvias are not frost-hardy and will die back during their dormant stage. However, most will start to set out fresh growth in the spring, despite their dead-looking appearance. Once you see these new little green leaves starting to sprout, it's safe to cut the plant back to about six inches from the ground.

All these curative and culinary purpose and beauty too! I can't wait to see the beginning growth and first blooms on my salvia and sages this year.

May 19, 2018