



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Maintenance of Mature Salvias in the Water-wise Garden (November 26, 2022)

by Nancy Hawkins, Tulare/Kings Counties Master Gardener

Six years ago, we decided to re-do our front yard by removing the lawn and replacing it with drought-tolerant and heat-loving plants. We consulted with a landscape designer, as I wanted my yard to have an English cottage style garden feel, not a desert landscape.

Our first step after the lawn removal, was to save the large shrubs (Nandina, Pineapple Guava, Razzleberry (*Loropetalum* "Razzleberri") and trees (Crape Myrtle, Chaste, Desert Willow, Red Maple and Flowering Plum). These trees and shrubs provide the backbone of the garden. As we had considerable time and effort in planting and maintaining these plants over the years, saving them was a top priority.

Then we selected colorful, drought tolerant plants to spread among those trees and shrubs. Among the plants selected were Purple Hopseed Bush, *Spirea*, *Lomandra* and *Artemesia*. But my favorites by far are colorful, aromatic, butterfly and bee attracting *Salvias*, or sages.

Salvias are a large group of garden plants that includes annuals, perennials, and evergreen or deciduous shrubs. The genus *Salvia* (in the *Lamiaceae*--Mint Family) offers Central Valley gardeners one of the largest and most versatile groups of plants available for water-wise gardening. The name *Salvia* is derived from the Latin word salver, which means "to heal." *Salvias* have been used for herbal and medicinal qualities since ancient times.

Flowering *Salvias* produce spikes of small, densely packed flowers atop aromatic foliage. These drought-tolerant beauties bloom from early spring to late summer in shades of blue, violet, red, pink, and white. There are varieties that grow in all conditions, from full sun to full shade. Plants grow 12 inches to 5 feet tall.



So, you may ask, what is my problem? My salvias are now well-established plants, and they bloom in full splendor through the spring and early summer. Bees and butterflies are abundant. But, in the hot summer months, these same plants look leggy with spent blooms on the end of stems. Do I prune? If so, when? How much? How about irrigation? These are drought tolerant plants. Does that mean they need no water, little water, more water as they grow? Time for some research. Here is what I found.

Deadheading (removing faded blooms) is the most basic pruning practice that improves the health and appearance of any *Salvia*. And it can be done as needed. But cutting back stems for healthy plant growth and good bloom requires knowledge of the main types of *Salvias*.

Rosette types, such as Hummingbird Sage (*Salvia spathacea*), give rise to erect flower stems surrounded by low mounds of foliage at the base of the stems. During bloom time, completely remove any flowering stems after they become spent. They may flower again. In Tulare-Kings Counties, when growth stops in the late fall, cut close to the ground any remaining flower stems. This pruning will strengthen roots for the next growing season.

Soft-stemmed deciduous sages have no woody growth. Most are winter hardy, returning year after year. Mexican bush sage (*Salvia leucantha*) is an example of this type. During the growing season, unsightly stems that have finished blooming can be cut to the ground. When the plant's appearance becomes messy, it is okay to give these sages a "haircut", trimming to 6-12 inches above the ground. You can expect fresh growth and new flowering. In the late fall, completely prune off the spent stems close (3-4 inches) to the ground. This severe pruning avoids a tangled mess next spring and controls pests over the winter.



Pruning for the larger, woody Salvias is similar to the smaller ones. Autumn sages (*Salvia gregii* species) and the popular Cleveland Sage (*Salvia Clevelandii*) are examples of woody stemmed Salvias. In our area, they may become shrub-like. During the growing season, removing spent blooms stimulates new growth and flowering. For a tidy fall clean up, following the last bloom, cut the spent stems to 5-6 inches above ground to prepare for the next growing season. Some of these Salvias can grow up to 120 inches tall and 48 inches wide. Prune these shrubby Salvias by removing old wood and crossing branches at any time. Pruning encourages new growth. They can also be pruned to control height, width and attractive appearance.

It was harder to find information on watering established Salvias. Salvias, like any drought tolerant plant, needs a long drink of water applied to the ground at the edge of its canopy or drip line. In the perennial drought-tolerant garden, it is recommended to water infrequently, slowly and deeply. I follow the city of Visalia's watering guidelines, watering twice a week in July and August. Since all the plants are drip

irrigated, I set my controller to water for long periods of time (an hour or longer) to allow for deep water penetration. The depth to which water needs to sink to feed the roots of well-established perennials may be as far down as 24 to 36 inches. Most drought tolerant plants, once established, do not need excessive summer irrigation. Even in this hot, dry summer (2022), our water usage per month has stayed the same or decreased over previous years

Though this article focuses on Salvias, caring for other drought tolerant plants and shrubs is similar. As with all gardens, maintenance is necessary and ongoing. Remember low water using plants does not necessarily mean low maintenance! I hope this information is useful in caring for established plants in a drought tolerant garden.

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