

## Ornamental Salvia (Sage)

*'Sage is singularly good for the head and the brain.'*  
Written by John Gerard, General Historie of Plantes, 1633

The Roman historian, Pliny, gave this plant its designation of Salvia from the Latin *salvare*, "to be saved". The Romans and Greeks alike thought this herb to be one of the most sacred and referred to it as *herba sacra*. They regularly performed their most sacred rites and ceremonies in conjunction with the harvest of this precious herb. Salvia was widely used for its medicinal properties well through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1630 a plague swept through Toulouse, France. Four thieves ransacked the city without contracting the disease; when finally caught a judge decided to commute their death sentences, if they revealed the secret ingredients to the mysterious decoction. The formula now known as the "The 4 Thieves Vinegar" was a combination of thyme, lavender, rosemary and sage steeped in vinegar. One hundred years later the disease struck again in Marseilles. Herbalists then added garlic as the fifth ingredient. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century a French distiller of vinegar patented the formula and marketed this elixir to nuns, priests and doctors. "Drink some on an empty stomach in the morning, rub your temples with it and go out in tranquility to visit the sick."

**Family:** Lamiaceae

**Genus:** Salvia

Worldwide there are some 900 species of Salvia. Within the genus, there are evergreen (foliage stays green year round) or deciduous (foliage and some parts of the plant die back in winter) shrubs, perennials, biennials and annual varieties.

The gardening community has taken to referring to the "culinary" species as 'sage' and the 'ornamental' species as 'salvia'. In reality all sages are salvia and all salvias are sages. You can use the terms interchangeably and always be correct.

Today, most salvia is grown for its ornamental interest. Although the genus includes species of what you might call *common culinary herbs*, I will only be discussing here what is considered the *ornamental species varieties*. The absolutely incredible variety of flowers/leaf colors and textures are nearly endless. The truly spectacular arrays of brilliantly colored flowers attract bees, butterflies and hummingbirds.

Salvias range in size from as small as 8" to over 10' tall and wide. One of my favorite places to see an excellent assortment of Salvias is at the Berkeley Botanical Gardens on the university's campus. It is a well-worthwhile visit to see some very beautiful and diverse mixture of salvia plants.

I would like to make some general statements about the genus salvia. When there is an exception to the rule, I will let you know when discussing the particular species.



1. Salvia genus is the largest of the Lamiaceae or mint family, which also includes other herbs, such as Mentha, mint; Lavandula, lavender; Ocimum, basil; Thymus, thyme and others, most recognizable by the square shape of their stems.
2. All sages have whorls of 2 lipped flowers. They have two distinct flower types – either evenly spaced along a flower stem or very tightly spaced so that they appear to be one dense spike and/or whorls.
3. There are as many colors of the species as you can imagine. Ranging from white to dark purple and every shade of red/pink/orange in between.
4. There are also as many foliage types as you can imagine. The leaf color and texture can vary from medium to dark green glossy or mat foliage about 1" long, to gray or silvery white with soft or course fuzzy hair and a leaf size up to 8" or more.
5. Give wispy varieties some support; use wire tomato cages, stakes, or grow behind sturdier plants like roses.
6. Sages do not have many pest problems, but slugs/snails, spider mites and aphids can be a problem especially in some areas of the county. It is true that many sages have chemical compounds that repel insects, but not all species do. Spray both tops and bottoms of leaves with water for spider mites and aphids until beneficial insects show up to save the day. Hand pick slugs/snails off the plants (I know this sounds gross, but after a while it gets to be a curiously fun adventure) early in the morning or with a flash light after dark. If handpicking slugs/snails is just not your thing, you can also use iron phosphate bait. *Baits containing iron phosphate are safer for children and pets than baits containing metaldehyde.*
7. Most *non-native* salvias like well drained soils that are rich in organic matter.
8. Most native varieties are very drought tolerant.
9. Many types of salvia have aromatic foliage.
10. Most grow from woody crowns with fibrous roots.
11. All sages benefit from pruning, either immediately after flowering or for reshaping the plant. Never prune further down the stem than where the leave stops on the plant. This is where the new growth is generated and will not recover if cut down too far. It is a good idea to prune a little at a time and regularly. If you do a heavy pruning too late in the fall the plant may rot over the winter months.
12. The use of mulch will help save moisture in the soil, but be sure to keep it away from the base of the plants.
13. Absolutely all salvias, culinary and ornamental, are always welcome additions to my garden. You cannot beat the color and soft femininity that it adds to a container or as a striking specimen in a garden setting.

## *Salvia splendens*: 'Scarlet Sage' or 'Firecracker'

Probably the most common and recognizable in general use is *S. splendens*. It is known for its fiery red flowers and is a favorite of many for its annual show of color. *S. splendens* has medium to dark green leaves. The bright red color with dark green leaves is especially striking. It is commonly sold in cell packs. The newer color varieties include shades of cream, peach and purple. This variety grows from 12-20". If you plant *S. splendens* in a place it likes, it will bloom profusely for you from spring until frost. Regular deadheading will encourage floral production. This plant does not like wet feet, but does do better if it has even moisture and shade in the afternoon, especially in the further eastern parts of Contra Costa County. If you live in the hot dry parts of the county and have no shade, then, I would suggest that you not use this plant. There are plenty of others I am about to discuss that are drought tolerant and truly are able to tolerate full sun.

Although this plant is considered to be an annual, in some of the milder areas of the county it may reseed in the spring or even survive the winter. It is technically a frost tender perennial. You can sow seed in early spring in the milder areas and later, possibly in early May, in the cooler areas. If you wish to transplant seedlings from indoors, do so when plants are approximately two inches tall. After transplanting lightly water every day for a week to 10 days or until well established. After the roots are established it likes to be watered infrequently and deeply rather than often and shallow. *S. splendens* does like a monthly feeding to encourage strong stems and good flower formation. This plant will perform at its best in well drained organically rich garden soil.



*Salvia farinacea*: 'Victoria Sage', 'Mealycup Sage',  
'Texas Violet'

*S. farinacea* grows to about 1 ½ feet and can grow to about 2 feet wide. The species' most common colors are blue, or blue/violet, and white. 'Cirrus' is about 14" tall and 'Victoria White' is about 18-20" and both are white. This plant also likes regular moisture and some afternoon shade. *S. farinacea* is a very common institutional bedding flower. You will see it in parks, in front of schools, hospitals, etc. It is very hardy and can take an active traffic area. I like to use this plant as an accent with delphiniums and roses. 'Victoria Sage' is an excellent bedding plant that has a nice neat growing habit and very good color. The bluish colors blend nicely with pinks or apricot and white flowers.

*S. farinacea* x *longispica* is a hybrid of Victoria Sage. It is a large shrub that can grow to be 4' tall with very long spikes of bluish purple flowers.

As with all *Salvias* pinch back spent blooms to encourage continued flowering.



**Native California Salvia**

The next group of *Salvias* are Native California varieties. The summer weather can be very drastic in the eastern parts of Contra Costa County and it would be a good idea to use drought tolerant plants. Native species may be the answer to your dilemma.

There are about 17 species in this category and using some of them in your garden will make your life much easier as you try your hand at growing salvia. The California natives, like other *salvias*, attract bumblebees, wasps, bees and hummingbirds. Due to the naturally dry climate in California these species are particularly well suited for growing in an arid environment similar to that of Contra Costa County.

Some of these species are among the most beautiful salvias I have ever seen. It is very amazing to me that you can grow them with little or no water. Some salvias, as I will indicate, will even grow in clay soil and in areas of wet winters and dry summers.

Native salvias are found as far north as the bay area, along the coast line, in parts of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, into the upper desert, as well as, along the western edge of the San Joaquin Valley.

In southern California it is thought that as much as 1/3 of the native vegetation may have been salvia, which grew along with oaks (*Quercus* spp.), toyons (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*), mountain lilac (*Ceanothus* spp.), California sagebrush (*Artemisia californica*) and *Rhus* species.



I have written, for the Master Gardener website, the sections on *Lavandula* and *Growing Herbs in Contra Costa County*. All of the pictures included with those papers were from my garden. Unfortunately, at the time of this writing either most of my salvia were done flowering or I didn't have the varieties I wanted to introduce you to in this article. I was grateful for the discovery of two websites that I used to bring you close up pictures of the native plants. The first being [www.laspilitas.com](http://www.laspilitas.com) and the second being <http://calphotos.berkeley.edu//flora/> from UC Berkeley. The photographers have my recognition, thanks and appreciation for use of their pictures.

### Salvia clevelandii, Chaparral Sage

*S. clevelandii* is the most fragrant of the California natives. This is a very beautiful species. It has gray green foliage resembling culinary sage leaves and reminds me of the way *Monarda* blooms with graduated flowers on each stalk. It tolerates a drier environment and grows up to 5' and can reach 8-10' wide. *S. clevelandii* makes a great specimen plant with a nice rounded arching growth habit. I would put this plant at the back of a wide border or along a pathway so that its aroma can be appreciated. It blooms at the end of June until sometime in August, and it attracts a wide assortment of beneficial insects. Cut back after flowers fade to avoid the center of the bush from opening up. If not done promptly after flowering you may not be able to repair the damage, even with a hard pruning. *S. clevelandii* can be used as an herb for tea or potpourri, but use sparingly as this plants essence is very strong.

'Alan Chickering' is a good variety. It has whitish foliage and pinkish/lavender flowers. It is great for open spaces, as it may reach 6' tall and 10+' wide. This evergreen shrub likes full sun, but will do better if you provide a little afternoon shade.

'Winnifred Gilman' is more compact to 3' tall and wide. It has dark red flower stems and calyx tubes with dark violet/blue flowers.

'Pozo Blue' is similar, but hardier and will tolerate low winter temperatures to 10F. This variety will thrive in sand or clay soil and is very drought tolerant. 'Aromas' is also a hybrid and has large, dark blue flowers.



Photograph by Las Pilitas Gardens

### **Salvia apiana, California White Sage, Bee Sage**

*S. apiana* is best known for its coveted use as a smudge stick ingredient. Its haunting aroma was used by Native Americans in cleansing rituals. This beautiful white sage has fuzzy silver green foliage. It is an excellent choice for moon gardens or in a mass planting among other darker green shrubs, such as Dwarf Coyote Bush.

Bumble bees love this plant and are the main pollinators. *S. apiana* is an evergreen shrub that grows 3-5' tall and wide, and blooms in spring. It is found wild growing on the dry hillsides of California and is very drought tolerant. Deadheading and light pruning is recommended for shape and to promote flower production.

In California it is near extinction in some areas where whole hillsides have been ripped out of the ground. It is a highly prized ingredient in 'smudge sticks' and is reportedly harvested by the truck loads. Originally used by Native Americans, the species is now typically used and grown for incense. Just think you can have your very own supply!



Smudge Stick



Photograph by Brother Alfred Brousseau, Saint Mary's College".

### Salvia sonomensis, Creeping Sage

This shrubby perennial is a trailing variety that can be used as a groundcover. Creeping sage commonly grows in soils that are very typical to CCC. You can grow *S. sonomensis* in clay soil that is dry and hard in summer and wet in winter. After the first year you will not need to do much to this plant other than dust it off with a good water spray. During the first year, water every couple of weeks until it is established and then a couple of times in late spring. It grows 8-12" tall and mats about 3-4' wide. It roots where branches touch the ground. The flowers are lavender/blue and grow on tall stalks in spring and summer. Creeping Sage performs best with a little shade. If you have the room for this beautiful spreader and the climate, soil and very little water, it's a no-brainer, plant it!

S. 'Gracias' is a hybrid between *S. sonomensis* and *S. clevelandii* and is much more reliable than either species in the creeping form of *S. sonomensis* and the beautiful flower of the *S. clevelandii*.



Photograph by Las Pilitas Garden

### **Salvia mellifera, Black Sage, Honey Sage**

Black sage grows along the tide lines from San Francisco down to San Diego. The fragrance is fresh and spicy. *S. mellifera* grows in sand as well as clay soils. Many small birds and quail like to eat the seeds and the light blue flower attracts hummingbirds, native flies and is particularly attractive to butterflies.

*S. mellifera* is an evergreen shrub that can reach 3-6' tall and wide. The leaf is tinged with black and is a nice contrast when the delicate light blue flower is in spring bloom. This is a good cover plant for dry hills and banks. It is not particular about soil and is fairly frost hardy. It is somewhat drought tolerant and will stand some shade. I would suggest a good deep watering every couple of weeks in a garden setting. If Black sage is not watered it will go dormant during summer months.

*S. mellifera repens* is creeping/cascading variety and has a very low growing habit. This species only reaches 2' tall and can spread as much as 6'. It will make a good ground cover if the upward reaching branches are clipped back to keep plant centered. If conditions are favorable plant will set roots where ever it touches the ground. The wood is burnt with oak wood in barbeques for smoking a savory flavor into meat.



Photograph by Christopher L. Christie

### **Salvia spathacea, Hummingbird sage, Pitcher sage**

You'll find *S. spathacea* growing under the Coast Live Oaks (*Quercus arifolia*) in the low coastal regions of California. Hummingbird sage is a tough plant. It is a very effective plant to cover hills and banks or rock gardens. It will tolerate drought, full to partial sun ... and will withstand full salt spray. Make sure you have the desire and the room to let this one go. It spreads by underground runners and will spread rapidly. *S. spathacea* has a pale green, wrinkled leaf and a light fruity scent. The flowers are ball shaped whorls of rosy red or magenta with maroon bracts and calyces. Blooms in spring and some have a repeat flush in autumn. Hummingbirds are wild about this plant.

'Kawatre' is a hardy variety with deep magenta flowers that age to orange red.

'Powerline Pink' is a larger form that grows to 6' in full bloom; foliage is about half that size and is rosy pink in coloration.

Prefers rich organic soil and although will tolerate dry arid conditions, performs better in a garden setting with regular moisture.



Photograph by Christopher L. Christie

### Salvia dorrii, Purple Sage, Desert Sage, Great Basin Blue Sage

**DO NOT WATER!** When have you ever seen plant instructions like that? My research indicates that this plant will die in most watered gardens!

It is a native to the high deserts of California, Washington, Idaho and Arizona. Well, if you have a rocky cliff with sandy soil, and perfect drainage, this may be the answer to your prayers!

Purple sage is absolutely stunning when in bloom. It grows to 3' and up to 4' wide; it may have a rounded or a low spreading habit. Grayish green leaves are close together and serve as background for the stunning flowers of light to medium blue, with medium to dark blue violet bracts and calyces.

*S. dorrii* is an evergreen shrub that performs well in dry desert gardens, or parkways. Plant it, abuse it and in late spring let it stop your neighbors in their tracks.



Photograph by Charles E. Jones

### **Salvia pachyphylla, Mountain Desert Sage, Rose Sage**

*S. pachyphylla* is a gorgeous plant from top to bottom. It is dubbed 'The Queen of California Sages' and the name aptly applies!

The elegant flower is light to medium blue offset by bracts and calyces that are pink to rosy red, some with yellow bases that fade into the pink color. Rose sage is an evergreen shrub that grows to about 3' tall and wide, and it has silvery green foliage.

Both the flowers and foliage are fragrant.

This plant will do well in dry arid conditions. For the first year, keep it slightly moist and ever after keep it dry. If you can't stand it and must water it, you will probably kill it. Leave it alone and enjoy the spectacular spring/summer blooms. *S. pachyphylla* tolerates full sun, likes sandy well drained soil, and is deer resistant. Butterflies, bees and hummingbirds love it!

Some years, the blooms are reported to be as big as the plant! *S. pachyphylla* is not easy to find, you may have to search the web or a local nursery that carries a good variety of native plants, but it is well worth the hunt. This is a real beauty!



Photograph by Las Pilitas Nursery

The next group of Salvias, although not native to California, are readily available at most local nurseries. The following species, with a little help, are good performers in Contra Costa County.

### **Salvia leucantha, Mexican Bush Sage, Velvet Sage**

*S. leucantha* is a native to central and eastern Mexico. This species is an evergreen perennial that grows at a very rapid pace. It will reach from 3-4', if winter slows it down or it will reach about 6' in milder areas, and it will spread from 3-6' with a sprawling growth habit. I would plant Mexican Bush Sage in an area where it has plenty of room to grow and in the middle or back of a garden. It can be a little wild looking, if it is growing in a milder area. I would suggest that you cut it back at some point to control its shape and size. It can be trimmed back after bloom period or cut back almost to the ground in spring before new growth begins. If you are in a milder growing area, you can also cut back midsummer. Trimming this plant will also help renew flowering stems. *S. leucantha* is a prolific bloomer, its most common bloom time is in winter through spring, however, with all of our microclimates, I have seen it blooming somewhere in Contra Costa County almost all the time. Flower production will stop if it is exposed to frost. It has white flowers with purple calyxes that grow out of the tip of the branches. It loves full sun and it is a good performer with low water needs. In most cases, it is only necessary to water once every two weeks or so. Removing spent blooms will encourage new flower production. The fuzzy flowers attract butterflies, hummingbirds and bees.

'Eder' is a variety that has leaves with creamy white edges.

'Midnight Purple Velvet' is probably the best variety for shape and color. It has a darker purple flower and calyces with dark grayish green leaves.



### **Salvia guaranitica, 'Costa Rican Blue', Anise-Scented Sage**

This South American beauty is a perennial in our zones, but considered an annual in colder areas. *S. guaranitica* has an upright growth habit that reaches for the sky at 4-5' tall and wide. It has mint-like leaves, with stunning 2" cobalt blue flowers. Calyces are bright green and some turn purple on the light side of the plant. 'Costa Rican Blue' spreads by underground tuberous roots.

This is a very lovely, but an extremely large plant that definitely makes a statement in your garden. I will testify to the fact that it is indeed very large and I did not plan a big enough space for it. *S. guaranitica* would be great in an area that you would almost like to naturalize with a certain species. This plant likes sun, but will tolerate partial shade in the further eastern areas of our county. If yours needs staking, I would try 'grow thru support rings' or extra large tomato cages. If you miss the opportunity to stake this plant when the new growth is less than two feet tall, you will most likely need to use the 'old string and stake' method. Cut Anise-Scented Sage down to the ground as the new seasons growth begins. If you have a very large pot, *S. guaranitica* also makes a very elegant potted plant.



### Salvia elegans, Scarlet Pineapple Sage

*S. elegans* is a perennial shrub that grows to about 3' tall and up to 4' wide. It is native to Mexico and Guatemala. Therefore it is hardy to only about 25 degrees. As its common name would indicate it has the fragrance of a ripe pineapple. It is refreshing in teas or fruit salad. Pineapple sage likes to be planted in well drained, organically rich soil. It thrives in full sun, but in further eastern areas of CCC, be sure afternoon shade is provided. Pineapple sage does not like wet feet, but does perform better when it has a consistent moisture level. The elegant tubular red flowers are favorites of hummingbirds and butterflies. I like to mix this flower in with other red, yellow and white flowers.

In colder areas of the county it will die back if it is exposed to continued cold weather, but in the milder areas it will bloom from fall to spring. If you do experience lower winter temperatures it will bloom in spring. Regular dead heading or even trimming several times a year will promote floral production.

This is a nice plant for a middle to back of border specimen that may need some support.



### **Salvia greggii, Autumn Sage**

Last, but not least is *S. greggii*. This is one of my favorite salvias. It is graceful and adds a lovely feminine touch to a container or garden setting. This Texas and North Central Mexico native has a nice round and compact growth habit. It grows from 1-4' tall and wide. Typically my experience with this plant is that it grows to about 2' tall and wide.

Autumn Sage has small glossy dark green leaves that I'm convinced are there only to glamorize the beautiful and varied colors of its flowers. The color varies from white to violet red and every color in between. Remove spent blooms and this plant will bloom from late spring until frost.

*S. greggii* will tolerate full sun, but it definitely benefits from a little shade.

In the milder winter areas of Contra Costa County this plant will be a nearly evergreen perennial. Where it dies back due to cold weather, trim down about a  $\frac{1}{3}$  and sever the dead branches.

Autumn sage has low water requirements, but it does like to be watered and will accept watering about once a week. After 4 years or so this plant becomes rather woody and will probably need to be replaced. In the meantime, sit back and soak in the beautiful shades of color *S. greggii* has to offer. Varieties: Pure White, 'Alba'; Hot Pink, 'Big Pink'; Bright Red, 'Desert Blaze'; Deep Red, 'Furman's Red.'



## Salvia Bibliography

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**NOTE: there are more entries but I removed them because the links did not work. Double check**