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SALVIA

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Salvias have been growing rapidly in popularity in recent years. Salvias (also known as sages) have gained their new fame because they flower for a long period; do well in hot, dry conditions; and they provide an incredible variety of fragrance, bloom habit and color. Salvias include some of our best summer-blooming annuals and perennials.

Height/Spread & Growth Rate

Most salvias grow fairly rapidly. The less hardy types that are usually grown as annuals may reach 5 to 6 feet by the end of the season. There are also many salvias that will stay low enough to be used at the front edge of your flowerbeds.

Ornamental Features

Salvias have brilliantly colored flowers and attractive, often scented foliage. They can be used for massing, borders, containers, accents and cut flowers. In addition to the colorful flowers and interesting foliage of salvias, one of the main benefits of growing sages are the hummingbirds and butterflies they attract.



Mexican Bush Sage (*Salvia leucantha*) flowering in autumn.
Photo by Joey Williamson, ©2007 HGIC, Clemson Extension

Landscape Use

Most salvias prefer full sun and well-drained soils, but there are also many that will bloom well in part shade. Most are quite drought-tolerant and require little care once established.

Wait to plant annual and semi-hardy salvias until after all danger of frost is past.

Remove the bloom spikes of salvias after blooms have faded to encourage continuous bloom. Wait until new growth begins to emerge in early spring to do your winter cleanup of old stems to avoid freeze damage to the less hardy types.

The best time to divide perennial salvias is in early spring, before new growth begins.

Problems

Salvias are relatively problem-free. They can be subject to damping-off of seedlings, stem and root rots, powdery mildew, Botrytis blight, aphids, spider mites and whiteflies. Diseases are most common either in greenhouses or under conditions that salvia dislike such as cool, wet weather. Insects are mainly problems in greenhouses.

Species & Cultivars

With over 900 species of salvias, there are far too many to give more than a few of the more popular types here. Many of the tender perennial species are popular as annuals where they are not fully hardy.

Annual Salvias: Some of the types most commonly grown as annuals are listed below. In some cases they may also be grown as perennials in warmer areas of South Carolina.

Scarlet or Texas Sage (*Salvia coccinea*): Scarlet sage has bright red flowers in whorls on 10-inch spikes. It is hardy in Zone 9 and may overwinter near the coast. It often reseeds itself. If it gets too tall, cut it back in midsummer. The plant will come back bushier with more blooms in the fall. Full sun to partial shade

- ‘Lady in Red’ Uniform, heat and drought-tolerant plants reach 2 tall and bloom prolifically. Reseeds very reliably.
- ‘Coral Nymph’ is a salmon and white bicolor on compact plants.
- ‘Snow Nymph’ is white and grows 24 inches tall with contrasting dark green leaves.

Fruit Sage (*Salvia dorisiana*): The large, lime green, heart-shaped leaves smell like tropical fruit punch. This plant rarely blooms in South Carolina, since it is a winter bloomer and not hardy, but it is worth growing for the beauty and scent of the leaves. Full sun or light shade.

Pineapple Sage (*Salvia elegans*): Pineapple sage is hardy in the lower part of the state but is usually grown as an annual. It has bright red flowers in late summer that are edible. The leaves, when rubbed, have a pineapple fragrance. Bushy plants grow about 4 feet tall

- ‘Frieda Dixon’ is a cultivar with pink flowers.

Mealycup Sage (*Salvia farinacea*): This very popular bedding salvia has been around for many years. Small violet blue or white flowers in 10 inch long spikes top 2 to 3 foot tall plants. Mealy-cup sage is hardy through most of the state but is more attractive when grown as an annual. Mealycup sage performs best in soil that is not overly fertile or moist.

- ‘Blue Bedder’ is a common 18-inch cultivar.
- ‘Cirrus’ is a compact white to 14 inches tall.
- ‘Evolution’ grows 18 inches tall and 14 inches wide. This cultivars has especially dark, violet-purple flowers.
- ‘Strata’ has deep blue flowers with attractive silvery gray bases and a compact habit to 18 to 24 inches tall on silvery stems.
- ‘Victoria Series’ is a compact, 18 to 20-inch series in deep blue and silvery white.

Mexican Bush Sage (*Salvia leucantha*): Spectacular purple and white velvety flower spikes cover the plant from late summer until frost. *Salvia leucantha* does well in full sun and heat, and tolerates some drought. It is hardy only on the coast, and even there may die in some winters. It is usually grown as an annual because of its speed and ease of growth. Hummingbirds and butterflies love this plant.



Scarlet Sage in late summer.

Photo by Karen Russ, ©2007 HGIC, Clemson Extension

Several new cultivars have all-purple flowers rather than the standard white and purple arrangement. These include:

- ‘All Purple’
- ‘Midnight’
- ‘Purple Velvet’

Gentian Sage (*Salvia patens*): Large, intensely brilliant true blue flowers top 12 to 18 inch tall sprawling plants. Full sun and sharply drained soil, in containers or in the open ground.

- ‘Cambridge Blue’ is a lighter blue cultivar.

Bedding Sage (*Salvia splendens*): Bedding sage is probably the most commonly grown ornamental salvia species. The usual color is brilliant scarlet red but *S. splendens* also comes in purple, orange, lavender, yellow and white. This annual salvia grows from 8 to 30 inches tall with large flower spikes held above dark green, heart-shaped leaves. They are ideal in full sun, but can also tolerate partial shade.

- ‘Bonfire’ (‘Clara Bedman’) Scarlet-spiked plants grow to a very even 26-inch height.
- ‘Carabiniere’ series is stocky and late blooming to 10 to 12 inches tall.
- ‘Laser Purple’ is a deep purple 10 to 12 inches tall cultivar that resists fading.
- ‘Salsa’ series exhibits strong colors and good flowering and does well in our area. They grow 12 to 14 inches tall in burgundy, salmon, scarlet, bicolors and white.
- ‘Top Burgundy’ is an early dark red to 12 inches.

Painted Sage (*Salvia viridis*): Grows to 2 feet tall. The flowers are white, purple or blue with brightly colored bracts.

- ‘Claryssa’ hybrids are pink, white or purple, 18 inches tall with broad bracts.
- ‘Oxford Blue’ has deep blue flowers.
- ‘Pink Sundae’ has rose pink flowers.

Perennial Salvias: The following salvias are usually grown as perennials. Most are hardy and will grow well throughout South Carolina.

White Sage (*Salvia apiana*): This small evergreen sage has white wooly leaves and clusters of white flowers often spotted with lavender. It needs full sun and well-drained soil.

Silver Sage (*Salvia argentea*): This sage is grown for its giant silvery gray wooly leaves. The spikes of silvery white flowers are attractive, but the plant will live longer if the blooms are cut off immediately



‘Evolution’ Mealycup Sage.
Photo by Karen Russ, ©2007 HGIC, Clemson Extension



Bedding Sage
Photo by Karen Russ, ©2007 HGIC, Clemson Extension

following flowering. This sage does best in dry, sunny areas with excellent drainage.

Azure Sage (*Salvia azurea* var. *grandiflora*): Azure Sage has aromatic foliage and airy, 4 to 6 foot tall stems with intense, sky blue flowers in late fall. You will need to either stake it or let it grow through other plants. Azure sage grows in any well-drained garden soil with full sun or partial shade. If grown in clay soils it may winter kill. Because the plant emerges late in spring it is wise to mark its location.

Cleveland Blue Sage (*Salvia clevelandii*): This evergreen salvia has very strongly aromatic, resinous, gray leaves. The scent travels on the air, unlike most salvias which must be rubbed to release their fragrance. The plant grows up to 2 feet tall with showy clusters of blue flowers in summer. It needs full sun and well-drained soil.



Silver Sage

Photo by Karen Russ, ©2007 HGIC, Clemson Extension

Peruvian Sage (*Salvia discolor*): The leaves of this somewhat tender sage have gray-green tops and white undersides. The strongly contrasting flowers are so dark purple that they look black. The plant grows to 2 to 3 feet tall and has a spreading, flopping habit. Full sun.

Autumn Sage (*Salvia greggii*): These shrubby sages are becoming increasingly popular for their brilliant colors and drought tolerance. They bloom through the summer and heavily in autumn. They need excellent drainage and full sun. Most cultivars will reach 2 to 3 feet tall. Autumn sage is hardy through most of the state. Some cultivars will not be hardy in the upper Piedmont and mountains. Many cultivars and hybrids are available in a wide range of colors and sizes.

- ‘Alba’ has white blooms.
- ‘Cienego D’ Oro’ has yellow flowers on shrubby 2-foot plants.
- ‘Maraschino’ has glowing deep red flowers and grows up to 4 feet tall. Excellent bloomer, strong grower and one of the hardiest red cultivars.
- ‘Plum Wine’ has plum-purple flowers on compact plants. Height to 2 feet.
- ‘Red Velvet’ is an excellent hybrid with large bright red flowers and shiny, rounded leaves. Height to 3 feet.
- ‘Cherry Chief’ begins flowering in late spring with bright red flowers and continues through summer and into the fall. This is one of the best of the summer-blooming *S. greggii* hybrids.
- ‘Raspberry Royale’ makes a large 4 to 5 foot wide, dense bush, topped with raspberry-colored flowers.
- ‘Moonlight’ has rich creamy light yellow flowers on erect woody stems and grows up to 2 feet tall and 2 feet wide.

Brazilian Blue Sage (*Salvia guaranitica*): This giant salvia grows to 5 feet with a dependably upright habit. It should be hardy throughout the state except for the mountain areas. The flowers are an extraordinary indigo-blue and bloom from early to late summer. They are extremely attractive to hummingbirds.

- ‘Argentine Skies’ has sky-blue flowers on stems shorter than the species, to 3½ feet.

- ‘Black and Blue’ (Costa Rican form) has blossoms that are deep blue emerging from a black base. The plant is very vigorous and will grow to 5 to 6 feet tall.
- ‘Omaha’ is similar to ‘Black and Blue’ with leaves that are edged in light yellow.

Salvia ‘Indigo Spires’: ‘Indigo Spires’ has dark blue purple flowers, on unusual long arching stalks throughout summer and until frost. It grows 4½ feet tall and nearly as wide.

Japanese Yellow Sage (*Salvia koyamae*): This sage grows in rich, moist soil in shade. It spreads as a groundcover and grows up to 1 foot tall, with pale yellow flowers in summer and fall.

Lyre-Leafed Sage (*Salvia lyrata*): This woodland and roadside native blooms in sun or shade with soft blue flowers in late spring. It grows to 18 inches tall. This sage has beautiful foliage when out of flower but spreads aggressively by rhizomes and seed. While its habits make it unsuitable for the flower border this is an excellent plant massed in woodland gardens and is good for erosion control. It likes drier soils with good drainage.

Common Sage (*Salvia officinalis*): Common sage is the same sage that you use to flavor your Thanksgiving stuffing. It is also a very beautiful garden plant. Sage is a small evergreen shrub with gray-green leaves and bluish-purple flowers in spring. It thrives in hot-dry areas. Several varieties are chosen for different leaf color or form.



Brazilian Blue Sage (*Salvia guaranitica*) giant salvia grows to 5 feet.

Joey Williamson, @2018 HGIC, Clemson Extension

- ‘Icterina’ has striking yellow and green variegated leaves. This cultivar is unfortunately short-lived.
- ‘Albiflora’ has white flowers.
- ‘Berggarten’ has very wide, silvery gray leaves, and is tolerant of heat and humidity. This cultivar is dependable and long-lived. It is lower and wider than regular common sage.
- ‘Tri-color’ has purple, gray green and pale pink variegated foliage.
- ‘Purpurea’ has smoky purple leaves.

Forsythia Sage (*Salvia madrensis*): This is a very large, robust sage that grows 5 to 7 feet tall with large, heart-shaped bright green leaves and yellow flowers from early fall until frost. It grows best in moist, well-drained soil in sun or light shade.

Salvia ‘Purple Majesty’: ‘Purple Majesty’ is similar to *Salvia guaranitica*, but has purple flowers and is a larger and more robust plant, growing at least 5 to 6 feet tall. It grows well in partial shade.

Clary Sage (*Salvia sclarea*): Clary sage produces a low, silvery, felted rosette of leaves in its first year, and the following year it sends up an tall bloom stalk smothered in white to mauve to pink flowers. The plant dies after the dramatic flowering is over, but distributes plenty of seed for a show in following years.



Common Sage

Photo by Karen Russ, ©2007 HGIC, Clemson Extension

- var. *turkestanica* has larger flowers that are bluer in color.

Hybrid Sage (*Salvia x superba*): This group of perennial sages are excellent for colder mountain and upper Piedmont areas when a hardy salvia is needed. Most grow 12 to 24 inches tall and bloom in late spring to early summer for a long period. If the old bloom stalks are cut back promptly, they will rebloom through fall. These are good salvias for the front of the border.

- ‘Snow Hill’ is a pure white flowered selection
- ‘East Friesland’ has deep purple flowers on a compact, 18-inch-tall plant.
- ‘Blue Queen’ has deep violet flowers, is 18 inches tall and is heat-and drought-tolerant.
- ‘Rose Queen’ has rose-pink flowers.
- ‘May Night’ was selected as the 1997 Perennial Plant of the Year by the Perennial Plant Association. May Night is distinguished by having dark violet-blue flower spikes on a compact plant.
- ‘Blue Hill’ has true blue blossoms.

Bog Sage (*Salvia uliginosa*): Bog sage is an open, upright plant with clear sky blue flowers along graceful arching stems. It blooms throughout the summer. Unlike most salvias, it thrives in damp to boggy soil, although it will grow well in ordinary garden soil also. It is ideal for the back of a flower border, where shrubs or sturdy-stemmed perennials can support its rather lax habit. The thin stems grow 4 to 5 feet tall.

Salvia verticillata ‘Purple Rain’: ‘Purple Rain’ grows 2 feet tall with bold foliage and stalks smothered in rich lavender flowers all summer.

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