

# Spectacular SALVIAS

BY DAVID J. ELLIS

Looking for something to liven up the late summer and fall garden? Add floral fireworks from the genus *Salvia*.



**I**N LATE SUMMER, the heat and humidity in the Washington, D.C., area seem to drain all the color out of my garden, just as it saps the energy from anyone brave enough to venture outdoors. The beds and borders take on a monochromatic dull green hue, with flowers already spent or not yet ready to open.

I needed to add something that would provide color during the dog days, filling the

floral breach before the cavalry arrived in the form of fall-blooming asters, toad lilies, and hardy mums. And a few years ago, during a late summer visit to the Dallas Arboretum and Botanical Garden, I found inspiration in the salvias I saw blooming in sheer defiance

**This display of scarlet or tropical sage features the seed-grown cultivar 'Lady in Red' along with selections that have white and bicolor flowers.**

of the oppressive Texas heat. As a bonus, these beautiful plants are magnets for a wide range of pollinators, from hummingbirds to bees, butterflies, and moths, adding even more color and movement to the garden.

The primary salvia I added to my garden is Mexican bush sage (*Salvia leucantha*), which is not hardy in the mid-Atlantic, where I live, but worth growing for its spectacular season-closing floral

display. This year, I'm trying two new hybrid selections developed from the same breeding program as 'Wendy's Wish', which is described later on. Part of the Southern Living Plant Collection, they are 'Ember's Wish' (bright orange flowers) and 'Love and Wishes' (purple flowers). They were just starting to put out flowers in early summer, so I will have to wait for the fall to see them at their peak.

While I'm eager to try even more salvias, I'm aware it is all too easy to get carried away by this genus. "Salvia is a collector's dream," writes perennial plant guru Allan Armitage in his omnibus *Manual of Herbaceous Perennial Plants*. "To collect them all is impossible but the trying is not. Enough ornamental species are available today that the collector can enjoy this hobby for a lifetime." If you really want to get hooked on the genus, track down a copy of *The New Book of Salvias*, written by Californian Betsy Clebsch, who is one of the preeminent experts on this wonderful plant.

Recently, I polled some fellow gardeners who have grown some of the summer- and fall-blooming species and selections. I not only got good advice for my mid-Atlantic garden, but suggestions for salvias suited to gardens in other regions of the country. Here are their recommendations for salvia species and selections to light up the late-summer garden.

***Salvia coccinea*** (USDA Hardiness Zones 8–11, AHS Heat Zones 11–5) Native to Mexico but widely naturalized in subtropical regions, scarlet or tropical sage is a short-lived tender perennial usually grown as an annual. It grows two to four feet tall and up to two feet in diameter with bright pink to scarlet flowers from midsummer into fall. Some cultivars offer white or bicolor flowers, too. "It re-seeds well, yet politely, in the Southeast," says Rita Randolph, owner of Randolph's Greenhouse in Jackson, Tennessee. "And crosses can be easily made if you like to play with such things." Randolph is partial to the selection 'Forest Fire' for its dark stems and vibrant red color.

Scott Calhoun, a landscape designer and garden writer in Tucson, Arizona, likes to use scarlet sage in his designs. "It looks great poking up among grasses," he

## A BIG FAMILY

The most familiar salvias in American gardens are common sage (*Salvia officinalis*)—a kitchen garden staple that comes in a range of decorative selections—and two time-honored bedding plants: mealycup sage (*S. farinacea*) and scarlet sage (*S. splendens*). But those species are just the tip of the salvia iceberg.



Two salvias that have a long tradition as bedding plants are scarlet sage (*S. splendens*), above center, and mealycup sage (*S. farinacea*), above left, shown growing with dusty miller.

Comprised of close to 1,000 species, not to mention numerous selections and hybrids, the genus *Salvia* is the largest member of the mint family (Lamiaceae). Most salvias are annuals, biennials, or herbaceous perennials, but some are deciduous or evergreen subshrubs in their native habitat. The majority of the species are native to Central and South America, but they are also found in Asia, Africa, and Europe. There are some 40 or 50 species native to North America, and many of the Mexican species are quite adaptable to garden culture, especially in the South, Southwest, and California.

In common with other mint relatives, salvias have square stems and opposite leaves. The foliage is usually aromatic if bruised or crushed, which is a good tip-off that the genus has a long history of medicinal and herbal uses—and also explains why salvias tend not to be bothered by some animal and insect pests. Salvias typically have spiky inflorescences composed of whorls of tubular flowers. Individual flowers have two lips that differ slightly in length and shape. Some salvias bloom in spring to early summer, but the ones discussed in this article flower in late summer and autumn. —D.J.E.

says. Where hardy, it should be cut back at the end of the growing season to stimulate new growth. One caveat is that it has shown a tendency to become weedy in tropical regions, including Hawaii.

***Salvia microphylla*** (Zones 8–10, 12–5) An evergreen shrub in its native range from southern Mexico across the border into southern Arizona, cherry sage is usually

grown as an annual. The species is quite variable in shape and flower color and crosses easily with other salvias, so several selections have been introduced. 'Hot Lips', a compact cultivar with striking red-and-white flowers, drew praise from several of the people I spoke with. "Hummingbirds and butterflies are constant visitors to this bicolor salvia, which is a showstopper in my garden," says Jim Long, owner of Long Creek Herbs

## SAGE ADVICE

Texas, the Southwest, and southern California are prime areas for growing salvias, many of which are well adapted to sandy soils and hot, dry summers. A longer growing season makes the Southeast and South good areas to grow fall-blooming species. In the Upper Midwest and New England, where the growing season is shorter, some of the subtropical salvias aren't able to come into full bloom before a killing frost.

In the coastal regions of the Pacific Northwest, frequent rainfall and cool temperatures make growing salvias challenging. "Sages that have a strong need for good drainage or are frost-tender don't do well here," says Genevieve Schmidt, a landscape designer and garden writer in Arcata, California, located near the Oregon border. In the Mountain West, where winters are harsh and the growing season is short, all but the hardiest salvias must be grown as annuals.

No matter where you live, appropriate site selection is key. Salvias require a sunny location with free-draining soil and good air circulation. Where summers are very hot, they may tolerate part shade. Salvias generally do best in a near neutral soil, but some Western natives will thrive in slightly alkaline sites.

Some salvias are susceptible to powdery mildew, especially in regions with high humidity in summer. Other than this, they are reasonably trouble free. In *The New Book of Salvias: Sages for Every Garden*, author Betsy Clebsch writes, "I believe the volatile leaf oils and other chemicals in salvias not only encourage good health but also discourage predation by insects, butterflies, snails, slugs, birds, and even deer."

Where hardy, salvias should be cut back in late winter to stimulate vigorous new growth and enhanced flowering. The ones that grow large, like azure salvia, can be cut back in early summer to keep them more compact.

Some salvias can be easily grown from seed sown in spring. But because salvias hybridize easily, purchase specific selections to ensure you are getting what you want. —D.J.E.



Salvias come in a range of habits, from bushy cherry sage selection 'San Carlos Festival', above, to upright, arching 'Ultra Violet', left, a hybrid of autumn sage and *Salvia lycioides*.

in Blue Eye, Missouri, who grows it as an annual. Randolph says 'Hot Lips' is faring "extremely well" in her Tennessee garden despite the recent severe winter.

### *Salvia greggii* (Zones 7–10, 11–4)

Native to western Texas and northern Mexico, autumn sage is a shrubby plant that grows to two or three feet tall and slightly broader, sometimes developing a mounded habit. Its flowers are typically scarlet to orange-red, but they can also be seen in hues from purple to white. "Many autumn sage selections are fully

hardy, tough, heat-tolerant plants and even seem to show some evergreen qualities in mild winters here in Tennessee," says Randolph. David Salman of High Country Gardens, a mail-order nursery in Santa Fe, New Mexico, likes the selection 'Ultra Violet', hardy to USDA Zone 5b, which is a chance cross between *Salvia greggii* and *S. lycioides*. "This hardy hybrid native sage blooms from midsummer into October with numerous violet-pink flowers," he says. "The nectar-rich flowers attract hummingbirds and the aromatic foliage repels browsing animals." Autumn sage should be pruned hard in early spring to keep it in shape and prevent it from becoming too woody, advises Randolph. It can also be cut back in early summer to encourage bushiness.

### *Salvia guaranitica* (Zones 7–10, 11–6)

A South American native, blue anise sage is surprisingly root hardy and can be enjoyed as an annual in regions with moderately long growing seasons. It can grow to five or six feet tall and wide in the right site and will flop if unsupported. The large, brilliant blue flowers open individually on footlong spikes from late summer until frost, and its large



Late-summer-blooming salvias such as blue anise sage, left, and Mexican bush sage, above, create a spectacle appreciated not only by gardeners, but by hummingbirds and many other kinds of pollinators.

green leaves are also attractive. Randolph, who has grown dozens of salvia species in Tennessee, says this is her favorite salvia “because of its hardy nature and vigorous growth habit. Once it gets started, there’s always plenty for hummingbirds and still enough to dig and share with other gardeners,” she says. Where hardy, it should be cut back hard each winter to prevent development of woody stems.

***Salvia leucantha*** (Zones 10–11, 12–5)  
Known as Mexican bush sage or velvet sage, this salvia is an evergreen shrub in its native habitat in Mexico. A vigorous grower, it forms a clump three or four feet tall and even wider, and it tends to

sprawl unless supported. From late summer through frost, its rich purple and white flowers bloom on terminal spikes. Of the several cultivars available, ‘Midnight’, which has deep purple flowers, is generally considered the best.

“Although Mexican bush sage is not hardy here in the Upper Midwest, I think it’s worth growing because it’s such a great addition for autumn garden color—and bunnies don’t eat it,” says Susan Appleget Hurst, a garden writer in Winterset, Iowa. “I love the huge velvety flower spikes, which are so stunning in late fall when there is little else blooming with such intense color.”

Randolph says Mexican bush sage and its cultivars “grow well in the South and

provide good fresh flowers when everything else is about bloomed out!” She recommends rooting cuttings in early fall to winter over for the following year.

***Salvia azurea*** (Zones 5–9, 10–1)  
Among the hardiest and at the same time most heat tolerant of the late-blooming salvias, blue sage is native from Minnesota and Nebraska down through the Southeast and Texas. It grows upright to three or four feet tall, with spikes of cobalt-blue flowers appearing in late summer. *Salvia azurea* var. *grandiflora*, a botanical variety with slightly larger flowers that occurs in a more westerly range, can sometimes be found under



Blue sage (*Salvia azurea*), left, is among the hardiest of the sages, while the hybrid 'Wendy's Wish', right, is mostly grown as an annual.

the name pitcher sage. In his book, *Guide to Growing and Propagating Wildflowers of the United States and Canada*, William Cullina notes that blue sage's new growth emerges late in spring and tends to be floppy unless staked. "If you tip-prune the plants in late spring and again in midsummer, site them in full sun, and do not overdo the fertilizer, they will form very satisfactory bushy clumps," he writes.

***Salvia reptans*** (Zones 8–10, 10–6)  
A perennial species native to mountainous areas of Texas, Mexico, and Guatemala, west Texas grass sage is a favorite of David Salman. "It explodes into color in early September with hundreds of deep cobalt-blue flowers," says Salman, who has grown and selected salvias for decades. "The bright green grassy leaves are narrow and grasslike and have a strong scent that resists browsing ani-

mals. Best of all, the hummingbirds love it!" It grows to three feet, but its leaves and stems tend to be floppy, so it's a good choice on a slope or at the edge of a wall. Where hardy, it will develop woody stems, so it should be cut to the base each year in late winter.

***Salvia 'Wendy's Wish'*** (Zones 9–10, 11–4)

Introduced in 2009, this selection is a spontaneous garden hybrid found growing near a Mexican sage (*S. mexicana*). Where it is hardy, it develops into an evergreen shrub about three or four feet tall and slightly less in diameter, but it can be grown as an annual. Its flowers offer an unusual bicolor effect, with the deep magenta flower tubes emerging from pinkish-brown calyxes. The flowers bloom from midsummer through fall. "Wendy's Wish' always looks great well into the autumn here," says Kelly D. Norris, horticulture manager at the Greater Des Moines Botanical Garden in Iowa. Randolph describes it as "a heat-loving hummingbird magnet" and praises it for its clean, glossy foliage and sturdy upright habit.

*David J. Ellis is editor of The American Gardener.*

## Resources

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- Herbaceous Perennial Plants** (3rd ed.) by Allan M. Armitage. Stipes Publishing, Champaign, IL, 2008.
- The New Book of Salvias: Sages for Every Garden** by Betsy Clebsch. Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2003.

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