





# Spectacular Salvias

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

BY DAVID J. ELLIS

In 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.

My garden begged for something that would provide color during these dog days, filling the floral breach before the cavalry arrived in the form of fall-blooming asters, goldenrods, and hardy mums. And a few years ago, during a late summer visit to the Dallas Arboretum and Botanical Garden, I found inspiration in



Above: Ideal for the front of the border or amid clumps of grasses, scarlet sage is generally grown as an annual and may self sow. Opposite: Mexican bush sage in late-season bloom.

the salvias I saw blooming in sheer defiance of the even more 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. 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."

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 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) 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 mid-summer into fall. Some cultivars offer white or bicolor flowers. 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 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 7–10) An evergreen shrub in its native range from southern Mexico across the border into southern Arizona, cherry sage is usually





'San Carlos Festival', left, has a shrublike habit and can even be used as low hedging. A hummingbird takes a sip from 'Hot Lips', above, a selection of cherry sage that has bicolor flowers.

grown as an annual. The species is quite variable in shape and flower color and crosses easily with other salvias, so several hybrid selections have been introduced. 'Hot Lips', a relatively compact cultivar with striking red-and-white flowers, is widely available years after its introduction and can often be found at farmer's markets. "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 in Blue Eye, Missouri, who grows it as an annual.

Another popular selection is 'San Carlos Festival', a compact, shrublike plant with magenta flowers that is great in containers and can even serve as a low-growing hedge, according to John Whittlesey, author of *The Plant Lovers Guide to Salvias* (see "Resources," page 17).

***Salvia greggii*** (Zones 7–10) Native to western Texas and northern Mexico, autumn sage is a shrubby plant that grows to two or three feet tall and slightly broader,

**The 'White' selection of autumn sage makes a cool-hued foil for brightly colored companions.**

sometimes developing a mounded habit. Blooming over a long period, its flowers are typically scarlet to orange-red, but they can also be seen in hues from purple to white. 'Ultra Violet', a chance cross between *Salvia greggii* and *S. lycioides* found in the Colorado garden of garden writer Lauren Springer, has astonishingly bright purple flowers. It is also hardy to USDA

Zone 5b and grows only a couple of feet tall so it is ideal for small gardens or containers. Autumn sage should be pruned hard in early spring to keep it in shape and prevent it from becoming too woody. It can also be cut back in early summer to encourage bushiness.

***Salvia guaranitica*** (Zones 8–10) A



TOP LEFT: BILL JOHNSON. TOP RIGHT: JANET DAVIS. BOTTOM: BRINDA MANDELLA





**Blue anise sage, growing here in the Pacific Northwest garden of Daniel Sparler and Jeff Schouten, grows five or six feet tall and often needs support.**

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 but will flop if left unsupported. The large, brilliant blue flowers open individually on footlong spikes from late summer until frost, and its large green leaves are also attractive. Carol Reese, a garden communicator based in Tennessee says she has grown several of the cultivars, but her favorite is still the straight species,

which is very hardy and blooms May to October. “It’s hard to find in the trade, but luckily I got one probably 20 years ago that has moved with me and been shared with friends,” she says. Among the selections, Reese likes ‘Van Rensen’, but says it must be cut back in early summer or staked to prevent flopping. “It blooms later than the species but continues on till frost,” she says. Where its hardy, blue anise sage should be cut back each winter to prevent development of woody stems. It may require supplemental watering and/or a site in

## 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.

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.

part shade in warm climate regions.

***Salvia leucantha*** (Zones 8–11) 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.

In Reese's Tennessee garden, compact 'Santa Barbara' is her favorite cultivar. "I lose it some winters but it's worth replacing," she says. "It must be planted high and dry for fast drainage to have any hope of survival." She also recommends 'Phyllis Fancy', a chance seedling that probably resulted from a cross with *S. chiapensis*. Growing four to five feet tall and wide, it has outstanding late season blooms.

***Salvia azurea*** (Zones 4–9) 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 the name pitcher sage. Kelly D. Norris, a horticultural consultant and author based in Des Moines, Iowa, likes the selection 'Blue September', part of a seed strain developed by plant breeder Joseph Ty-chonievich. "It's a great example of the kinds of cultivars with significant garden value both horticulturally and ecologically," says Norris. "As a seed strain, of course, each individual is genetically unique but with similar traits: standard order blue flowers on compact, stout plants that are 25 to 50 percent shorter than wild-type species."

***Salvia reptans*** (Zones 6–10) A perennial species native to mountainous areas along the border between Texas and Mexico, west Texas grass sage was a favorite of the late David Salman, founder of High Country Gardens nursery in New Mexico. This drought tolerant species grows to two or three feet tall and spreads about twice that. The brilliant blue flowers, which bloom from late summer into fall, contrast with the

## SAGE GROWING ADVICE

Texas, parts of the Southwest, and southern California are prime areas for growing salvias, many of which are well adapted to sandy soils and hot, dry summers. But Scott Calhoun, a Tucson, Arizona-based garden designer says most species need some shade in desert regions. "I do still use them



**Notable for its linear foliage and narrow stems, Texas grass sage has a floppy habit that is ideal for slopes or border edges.**

in east exposures, oasis zones, in partly shaded situations, and sometimes as understory plants beneath desert tree species," he says. 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 won't 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, many will benefit from part shade. Salvias generally do best in a near neutral soil pH, 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.

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 and bushy.

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.

narrow, grasslike foliage. Its 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 9–11)

Introduced to North America in 2009 as part of the Southern Living Plant Collection, 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,



**For striking colors and long bloom periods, it's hard to beat 'Wendy's Wish', above, and 'Amistad', below.**

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. Subsequent releases from this breeding program, which benefits the Australian Make a Wish foundation, are 'Ember's Wish' (bright orange flowers), 'Love and Wishes' (purple flowers), and 'Kisses and Wishes' (fuchsia-pink flowers).

**Salvia 'Amistad'** (Zones 7–10) Emerging from a nearly black calyx, the eye-catching deep purple flowers

## Resources

**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.

**The Plant Lover's Guide to Salvias** by John Whittlesey. Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2014.

## Sources

**Annie's Annuals & Perennials**, Richmond, CA.

[www.anniesannuals.com](http://www.anniesannuals.com).

**Digging Dog Nursery**, Albion, CA. [www.diggingdog.com](http://www.diggingdog.com).

**Flowers by the Sea**, Elk, CA. [www.fbts.com](http://www.fbts.com).

**Goodwin Creek Gardens**, Williams, OR. [www.goodwincreekgardens.com](http://www.goodwincreekgardens.com).

**High Country Gardens**, Santa Fe, NM. [www.highcountrygardens.com](http://www.highcountrygardens.com).

of 'Amistad' bloom constantly from spring until frost. This hybrid from the Southern Living Plant Collection is reported to contain genes from *S. guaranitica*, but "it does not cycle in and out of bloom like *S. guaranitica* plants normally do," says Jason Reeves, a horticulturist with the West TN AgResearch & Education Center in Jackson, Tennessee. "It is also a magnet for butterflies and hummingbirds, and I have found they favor it over *S. guaranitica* and its cultivars." Reeves reports 'Amistad' is "hardier than expected, surviving brief periods at or just below zero Fahrenheit numerous times in the 15 years I have been growing it." According to Reeves, 'Amistad' is fairly root hardy even in pots, and makes an outstanding container specimen up to six feet tall. ■

*David J. Ellis is editor of The American Gardener. This article is a revised and updated version of one that was originally published July/August 2014.*