

## Sage Advice on Salvia

By Susan Camp

My friend Terri, who is new to gardening, recently asked me, “What is Salvia?” I told her that Salvia is the proper name for about 2000 species of sage. I exaggerated; the number of species is approximately 1000 and includes annuals, biennials, perennials, and shrubs. In other words, you could fill your entire garden year-round with species of Salvia.

The genus Salvia is a member of the mint family and exhibits the typical square stems. Species vary widely, but most display soft, hairy, gray-green leaves that emit a strong, savory aroma when crushed. The two-lipped flowers bloom in panicles in shades of lavender, purple, pink, orange, red, yellow, and white. Salvias bloom most heavily in the spring, but many will continue to bloom into the fall.

Salvias are native to the Mediterranean, Central and South America, and Central and Eastern Asia, but have naturalized over much of the globe. Salvia species prefer dry, sunny areas: open meadows, woodlands and rocky hillsides in USDA Hardiness Zones 4 through 8. Most Salvias will thrive in moist, well-drained humus, but will tolerate sandy soil, as well as drought conditions, deer, and air pollution.

Salvias often are referred to as “sage”, although most of us think of the culinary herb when we hear the latter term. Common sage (*Salvia officinalis*) has a long history of use in Britain as one of the four essential kitchen herbs. Parsley, rosemary, and thyme are the other three essentials. In the United States, cooks use sage in their Thanksgiving turkey stuffing and in sausage. My favorite cooking variety is ‘Berggarten’, which does not produce flowers. The aromatic, silver-green leaves of this variety make a beautiful show in the garden, as well as being a tasty additive to poultry and pork dishes.

Other popular culinary sages include purple sage (*S. officinalis* ‘Purpurascens’), one of several Salvias called purple sage; tricolor sage (*S. officinalis* ‘Tricolor’); and variegated sage (*S. officinalis* ‘Icterina’).

“Salvia” derives from the Latin verb for “to be saved” or “to be healed”, and the term “officinalis” refers to the medieval use of sage as a medicinal plant. Essential oil is distilled from the stems and leaves. The oil contains various chemicals, including thujone, which can be neurotoxic.

Two non-culinary sages in our garden right now are *Salvia greggii* ‘Cherry’, and *Salvia nemorosa*, also known as *Salvia x sylvestris* ‘Mainacht’ or ‘May Night’. Bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds feed on the blossoms of both varieties.

*S. greggii* ‘Cherry’ is called cherry or autumn sage. A native of central and western Texas and Mexico, it is a hardy subshrub with small, gray-green leaves. Cherry sage reaches a height of 3 feet with a similar spread. The two-lipped red flowers bloom heavily in the spring, with lighter blooms in summer and fall. Cherry sage likes well-drained, sandy or rocky soils in full sun in USDA Zones 6 through 9.

*S. nemorosa* 'May Night', sometimes called wood sage, is an herbaceous perennial that reaches 1 ½ to 2 feet with a spread of 1 to 1 ½ feet. Spikes of tiny, deep purple flowers emerge from clumps of lance-shaped, medium green leaves in May or June. If deadheaded, the plants will continue to produce flowers all summer. 'May Night' prefers moist, well-drained humus in full sun in USDA Zones 4 through 8.

Few disease or insect pests affect *Salvias*, although powdery mildew, leaf spot, stem rot, and rust can cause problems. Aphids, mealybugs, white flies, and thrips can attack *Salvias*.

One species, *Salvia divinorum*, has received negative publicity in the past several years for its hallucinogenic properties and misuse potential. According to <http://www.webmd.com>, the toxic substances in *S. divinorum* activate opioid receptors in the brain and cause confusion, disorientation, and loss of physical coordination. The drug has addiction potential.

Pretty *Salvia* plants offer a wide range of color and fragrance in the garden and kitchen. Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder offers profiles on many *Salvia* species.

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