

June 2020 Gardener's Corner

By San Joaquin County Master Gardener Cate White

Last month's column discussed various plants that are attractive to birds and several *Salvia* varieties were mentioned. Salvias, or sages, are a large genus of drought tolerant plants that deserve a more in depth discussion of their own. Being in the mint family, all salvias have square stems and fragrant leaves. They have tubular flowers, which are much favored by hummingbirds and other pollinators. The flowers are borne on long stalks in loose or tightly formed whorls, in colors ranging from white to pink, salmon, orange, red, light or dark blue and purple. Some Salvias are large shrubs suitable for foundation plantings, some are smaller and more compact and a few even grow as groundcovers. Most are perennials, although a few are annuals. Some of the perennial types are deciduous or semi deciduous, dying back in the winter, and should be cut down to a foot or less off the ground. They send up new shoots in early spring, and grow rapidly. Annual varieties are good as colorful bedding plants. All thrive in well-drained soils and have low to moderate water requirements. Most do well in full sun, although others prefer light afternoon shade, and many are well suited to our area.

Many of us are familiar with *Salvia officinalis*, the Common or Culinary sage used in cooking to flavor poultry, sausage, and many Italian dishes. These shrubby gray-green perennials are one to two feet high, and have a three to four year life span. There are several variations of this type. Berggarten Sage has more compact growth and larger, rounder leaves. Red or Purple Sage has deep green leaves tinged with reddish purple, Tricolor has variegated green, purplish and cream-colored leaves, and Golden Sage has green leaves overlaid with creamy gold variegations. All are good for culinary use, although I find the Berggarten and Purple varieties the most flavorful, and I much prefer the taste of fresh leaves to those that are dried.



S. officinalis - Tricolor Sage

Photo: Almanac.com

Salvia apiana, or California White Sage, is native to southern California and is used by Native Americans for ceremonial and medicinal purposes. This aromatic plant grows three to five feet tall and as wide, with light gray wooly leaves and lavender tinged white flowers in spring.



S. apiana - California White Sage

Photo: UC Davis Arboretum All Stars

Salvia clevelandii, or Cleveland Sage, is another sage native to southern California. The entire plant is wonderfully aromatic, growing three to five feet tall and five to eight feet wide. It has two-inch long gray-green leaves and light lavender-blue flowers in early summer. The variety Winnifred Gilman has more compact growth and darker blue flowers.

All of the above plants are evergreen and need to have spent flowers removed and light to moderate pruning to stay compact. They are also drought tolerant and can take full sun.



S. clevelandii - Cleveland Sage

Photo: UC Davis Arboretum All Stars

Salvia elegans, or Pineapple Sage, has bright green pineapple scented leaves, with upright growth three to four feet tall and wide. Slender, bright red flowers prized by hummingbirds appear in fall and continue until the first frost. The plant benefits from pinching back to keep compact and enjoys light afternoon shade. The leaves make a refreshing tea and can be added to fruit salads.



S. elegans - Pineapple Sage

Photo: ag.tennessee.edu

Salvia leucantha, or Mexican Bush Sage, has upright arching growth from three to four feet tall and three to six feet wide. The gray-green leaves are narrow and pointed, and velvety, purple and white flowers appear from early summer to frost. Established plants thrive with minimal water and full sun to light shade.

Salvia guarantica, or Anise-Scented Sage, grows up to five feet tall and wide. The variety Black and Blue is slightly more compact and has deep blue flowers in summer contrasting beautifully with its bright green leaves. It is a great plant for large containers, and will appreciate some light afternoon shade. Hummingbirds find it particularly attractive.

The above three varieties die back in winter and look best if cut back to about a foot off the ground. *Salvia guarantica* may die back completely, but will re-sprout in spring.

Salvia microphylla, or Mint Bush Sage, is an evergreen plant with small, roundish, bright green leaves and long thin stems. Hot Lips is a commonly grown variety with upright growth up to two feet tall with bright red or red and white flowers loved by hummingbirds throughout the growing season. It will take full sun, needs moderate water and may need pruning to stay compact.



S. macrophylla - Mint Bush Sage

Photo: UC Davis Arboretum All Stars

Salvia farinacea and Salvia splendens are both grown as annual bedding plants. Victoria Blue is a S. farinacea variety that grows about a foot and a half tall, with tightly spaced whorls of blue or blue and white flowers on taller stems. These plants grow well in full sun. S. splendens, or Scarlet Sage, is commonly found as a compact, one-foot tall variety. It has bright green heart shaped leaves and flower spires in a wide variety of colors, including true red, salmon, pink, white, and purple. It does best with afternoon shade.

This is just a sampling of the variety of Salvias. As you can see, it is a genus well worth exploring. For a more complete listing and description of Salvias, refer to the Sunset Western Garden Book.

June Garden Checklist

- Thin fruit on stone fruit trees. Be ruthless! Thinning avoids stressing your trees and results in larger, better fruit.
- Check irrigation to be sure all units are functioning correctly. Adjust days and timing according to temperatures.
- Apply mulch to bare areas.
- Fertilize and dead-head roses.
- Early June is still time to plant seeds or seedlings of beans, corn, cucumbers, squashes and basil, and seedlings of eggplants, tomatoes peppers and basil. You can also plant dahlias and colorful annuals such as zinnias, vinca and calibrachoa.
- For color and water conservation, plant pots with succulents. There are hundreds of interesting varieties to choose from. Portulaca is a low-growing succulent annual with attractive showy flowers.
- A word about neem oil. It has come to my attention that some are reluctant to use it because it can harm bees. Keep in mind that neem oil is a short-acting pesticide that will only harm bees if they come into direct contact with it. Once it has dried on the plant, it is no longer a danger to them. This is why it should be used later in the day, or even after the sun sets, when bees are no longer present. Spraying at this time of day will also prevent damage to your plants, which can occur if neem oil is used in full sun.