

# Celebration of SALVIAS

Few plants are as useful as salvias, grown for their gorgeous flowers and fragrant leaves. DERYN THORPE revels in their beauty and diversity

Salvias (*Salvia* spp.) are the stalwarts of my garden – not divas, like the roses, but hardworking plants that provide colour and foliage fragrance all year. Everything about them is extreme. The flowers come in bright colours from intense cobalt blue to eye-popping red, and plants range from diminutive specimens to sprawling giants.

I simply adore these plants, with their diverse habits. Forms with arching canes can be used to meander through Shrub roses, and I can define certain areas by hedging compact varieties, or use smaller forms to provide waterwise colour in containers.

Beneficial insects, and birds that feed on seed and nectar, flock to plants that have racemes or panicles of tubular flowers held on stalks. Many species have ornamental calyxes, too, that remain after flowers fall.

Salvias come from temperate or subtropical regions, and varieties can be either evergreen or deciduous,

and perennials, biennials or annuals. You will also find varieties that are drought tolerant or frost tolerant, and those that thrive in hot and humid conditions.

## some favourites

There are more than 900 salvia species, and hundreds of easy-to-grow cultivars and hybrids to choose from. Start a salvia collection and you'll become addicted! The smallest is autumn sage (*S. greggii*), with cultivars ranging from 30 to 80cm, making them perfect for pots. This group is drought and frost tolerant, and they flower from spring to autumn, if pinched back regularly to encourage branching and more flowers.

As gardens are getting smaller, wholesalers are following the trend by introducing a greater range of small, perennial salvias. My pick is *S. 'Wendy's Wish'*, a seedling discovered in Victoria and now loved the world over. It grows to 80cm tall and wide, flowering

in warm weather with magenta flowers, capped with a colourful, darker calyx that remains after the flowers fade. There are two other beautiful small salvias in the 'Wish' series, which suit all climates. These have a dense habit and can be grown as an informal hedge. *S. 'Hot Lips'* is also lovely grown as an informal hedge. This easy-care form grows to 90cm tall and 80cm wide with small, dense, fruit-scented foliage. Its bicoloured red and white flowers (mostly red in summer) appear in all but the coolest months. In my front cottage garden I team big salvias with Heritage roses. The colours of the pink and peach roses appear more intense when combined with blue or purple salvia flowers spikes. One of my favourites is *S. 'Indigo Spires'*, which grows about 1.3m tall and wide. It is well suited to humid climates, and flowers during all but the winter months with impressive spikes of rich violet flowers. Keep it pruned to stop it ▶

PHOTOS ALAMY, THE GARDEN COLLECTION/FP/GISELA CASPERSEN

"There are more than 900 salvia species and hundreds of cultivars and hybrids"

## salvia care

All salvias need excellent drainage (with the exception of the aptly named bog sage). They prefer growing in full sun, but also do well in semi-shade, with morning sun and afternoon protection. They are mostly unfussy. Water weekly during dry times (more frequently in sandy soil) and provide an occasional handful of fertiliser so they continue to grow and bloom.

Prune at the end of the flowering season to keep them in shape. Use hedge shears for smaller varieties, but cut the bigger forms down to just above the ground. The prunings make good cuttings and strike easily.



## DELICATE FLOWERS

Clockwise from left Lady's mantle (*Alchemilla mollis*) makes a great backdrop for a vibrant salvia; flowers appear on *Salvia 'Waverly'* nearly all year; the leaves and flowers of pineapple sage (*S. elegans*) can be eaten.



"Forms with arching canes can be used to meander through shrub roses"



**STANDING TALL**

Clockwise from top left  
*Salvia leucantha*;  
*S. mexicana* 'Limelight';  
*S. uliginosa*; *S. madrensis*;  
*S. 'Hot Lips'*. Right  
 Culinary salvia/sage  
 (*S. officinalis*).

romping throughout the garden because, in damp soil, it sets roots wherever the stems touch the ground.

Another one I love is *S. 'Megan's Magic'*, which has 30cm-long spikes of white flowers held in deep violet-black calyxes. Its arching, grey-green stems grow to 2m tall. I keep it contained by cutting long stems for the vase in summer, in turn encouraging more blooms. If you like this one, *S. 'Phyllis Fancy'* and *S. 'Waverly'* have a slightly smaller growth habit, although the flowers are not quite as striking.

Some of my most cherished salvias include pink and red forms of tropical sage (*S. coccinea*), given to me by a fellow salvia enthusiast at an open garden many years ago. These grow 60–80cm tall and, while they are short-lived perennials, they are normally treated as annuals, and grow easily from seed.

The best-known salvia annuals are varieties of mealy sage (*S. farinacea*), often sold in economical punnets in shades of white, blue, purple and scarlet. In my dry Perth climate, annual salvias often self-seed, then live for a year or more. The blue form is my favourite. In my garden, I mix it with purple-flowered scabiosa, burgundy-leaved *Alternanthera* 'Little Ruby' and pink pelargonium. It also suits pots, and teams brilliantly with orange-flowered annual marigolds.



**more favourites**

• Sp = spring, S = summer, A = autumn, W = winter  
 ☀ frost tolerant ☀ drought tolerant ☀ suitable for hot and humid climates ☀ sun ☀ semi-shade

• *Salvia mexicana* 'Limelight' ↑ 1.5–2m ↔ 1.2m  
 ☀ Sp/S/A ☀ ☀ ☀ Electric blue flowers with lime green calyxes.

• Bog sage (*S. uliginosa*) ↑ 1–2m ☀ S/A ☀ ☀ ☀ ☀  
 Spreads via runners, so grows as wide as you allow. Sky blue flowers, prefers moist conditions.

• Mexican sage (*S. leucantha*) ↑ 1.3m ↔ 1.5m  
 ☀ Sp/S/A ☀ ☀ ☀ ☀ Grey-green foliage. Velvety white, pink or purple flowers. Dwarf forms available.

• *S. 'Heatwave'* ↑ 80cm ↔ 80cm ☀ Sp/S/A/W  
 ☀ ☀ ☀ Hybrid salvia series, which includes white, pink, peach, mauve and red flowers.

• *S. guaranitica* 'Black & Blue' ↑ 1m ☀ S/A  
 ☀ ☀ ☀ Cobalt blue flowers with almost black calyxes and aniseed-scented leaves. Dies back in winter. Runs rampant if soil around the base is disturbed. 'Costa Rican Blue' is similar but bigger (2–3m tall).

• Forsythia sage (*S. madrensis*) ↑ 1–2m tall  
 ↔ 1m ☀ S/A/W ☀ ☀ ☀ Butter-yellow spikes of blooms, and heart-shaped leaves on shrub.

• Burgundy sage (*S. vanhouttei*) ↑ 1–1.3m ↔ 1m  
 ☀ Sp/S/A/W ☀ ☀ ☀ Light green foliage, unusual burgundy-coloured blooms.

• *S. 'Purple Majesty'* ↑ 1–1.5m ↔ 1m ☀ Sp/S/A  
 ☀ ☀ ☀ Purple flowers and greenish, purple-tinted calyxes.

• *S. discolor* ↑ 1m ↔ 1m ☀ Sp/S/Au/W ☀ ☀ ☀  
 Sprawling shrub with scented leaves and navy-black flowers in silver-green calyxes.

• *S. iodantha* ↑ 3m ↔ 2m ☀ A/W ☀ ☀ ☀ ☀  
 Sprawling, ungainly shrub with spectacular velvet-magenta flowers. Needs support.

*good enough to eat*

Then there are the culinary salvias (*S. officinalis*). Known as sage, which is from the Latin word *salvare*, meaning 'to save', these have been used medicinally for hundreds of years. I use them in stuffing and as a gargle for sore throats. They are short-lived perennials to about 60cm tall, and look as good as they smell. Varieties include the purple-leaved 'Purpurascens', gold-leaved 'Aurea', and 'Tricolor', with grey-green leaves that have stripes of yellow and rose.

Also edible is pineapple sage (*S. elegans*), which bears bright red flowers through late summer and autumn. The fruit-scented leaves and flowers partner well with drinks and fruit salads. Don't confuse it with *S. coccinea*, which has a grassy smell when you crush the leaves. This one can make you ill. **GA**