

Is It Sage or Is It Salvia?

by Joyce Friels, Bell County Master Gardener

When I would see the pretty green plant called sage growing in a nursery or see a picture of the green sage in a magazine, my first thoughts were of the herb used in making turkey dressing; and the bright red flowering, bedding plant seen in most spring and summer gardens was called red salvia or scarlet sage. I didn't connect the two until I began to learn more about these members of the mint family. Their square stems, opposite leaves, and the definite aroma when touched or crushed, can identify members of the mint family. Also, the leaves and blooms of many varieties of sages (salvias) have a rough but downy texture, making them feel velvety or hairy, which deer find unappetizing.

Throughout time, the term sage has been associated with cooking or medicinal uses and the term salvia has been given to the more ornamental flowering varieties; however, they are one and the same. Sages used in gourmet kitchens are usually small green plants that have small or inconspicuous flowers while the ornamental salvias used in landscaping show off with a variety of colors and sizes. Culinary or garden sage (*Salvia officinalis*) has long been considered an "annual" by herb gardeners in Texas. This is the variety that makes the stuffing so fragrant in our stuffed Thanksgiving turkey. It flourishes in the early spring, before hot weather sets in, as it likes the cool temperatures of both spring and fall and will sometimes grow throughout our winters, if they are mild. However, any time it is flourishing it can suddenly, without warning, wilt and die. When placed in a sunny spot close to your kitchen or an outside door, it will be easily noticed and can be freshly harvested for use in your meals in many ways. So, while the everyday common name may be Tricolor Garden Sage, its real name is *Salvia officinalis* Tricolor. Look for different varieties of culinary sages in the garden centers next spring.

The ornamental salvia that I remember from my mother's garden was known as Scarlet Sage (*Salvia splendens*). This annual can reseed in our Zone 8 and now comes in many different colors including tri-color, shrimp and confetti. Another popular salvia for Central Texas gardens is *Salvia farinacea* known as Victoria Sage. It makes an excellent everlasting plant with its purple or white blooms or a combination of purple and white on the same plant. Another species of *Salvia farinacea* is Mealy-cup Sage. It is native to Texas and its colors range from blue to white to purple. It attracts all kinds of butterflies and blooms from spring through fall. *S. coccinea*, Texas Hummingbird Sage, is a vibrant red that is now available in pink. It reseeds itself, and looks great in sun or shade. I have to mention Mexican Bush Sage (*S. leucantha*) because of its long spikes of velvety purple flowers. It is one of my favorite salvias to use as it is so striking in the landscape. It will die back to the ground in the winter but if covered with mulch it will return in the spring more vibrant than the year before. It is stunning planted in mass along a fence or drive. Another favorite in the landscape is *Salvia greggii*. Known as Autumn Sage or Cherry Sage it is a winner for long bloom time and dependability and comes in many colors. It is a favorite of butterflies and the hummingbirds love its tubular like blooms. It seems to bloom almost year round and mixes well with most flowers.

Another good salvia for the landscape is Texas Sage (*Leucophyllum frutescens*). Because of its habit of blooming just before a rain it is known as "rain bush". It looks great as a specimen plant and in groups of three or five. Use it to define your property line and to restrict the view from neighbors if you can't put up a fence and once established it is very water efficient. It withstands heat and drought and tolerates poor soil. Texas sage likes a sunny spot in your landscape where it will grow to six feet. It is a very attractive plant whether trimmed as a hedge or left to show its form. The purple-pink blooms make it a standout against its grey-green foliage.

The genus *Salvia* contains over 700 species worldwide. We are fortunate here in Central Texas that we can grow dozens of varieties of salvias (sages). These plants provide an incredible variety of fragrance, bloom habit and color for your garden. I have found salvias easy to grow, relatively problem free, drought tolerant, a rapid grower, and they also do very well in full sun or part shade in well-drained soils. The Central Texas landscape provides an almost perfect environment for these water efficient plants that require little care once established. Salvias grow to different heights which makes them adaptable to use anywhere in your yard. Use them for mass planting, borders, containers, accents and cut flowers. One of the main benefits of growing salvias (sages) is the hummingbirds and butterflies they attract.

Remove bloom spikes of salvias after blooms have faded to encourage continuous bloom. Wait to plant

annual and semi-hardy salvias until after all danger of frost is past. The best time to divide perennial salvias is early spring, before new growth begins. Combine red and blue varieties with yellow coreopsis, purple petunias, and yellow or pink cosmos for the start of a butterfly garden. Start looking for salvias in the nurseries and garden centers in February and March. There are annual and perennial varieties to choose from. Salvias bring color to the garden from spring until a hard frost, so try some of each in your landscape and enjoy their color and easy care.

The salvias I have mentioned here all do very well in this area of Texas and give you a good selection to start your garden. With so many varieties to choose from, I will always add one or two new ones each year as they make the landscape "pop" and are great for attracting wildlife to your yard. And remember, salvias (sages) are deer resistant! Plant salvias where you desire dependable plants to show off almost twelve months of the year. Then enjoy your salvia-enriched garden!