

**WEEKLY NEWS ARTICLE**

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## How to Prune Salvias

By Judy Haldeman, Master Gardener

Salvias are a staple of Texas gardens because they have long-lasting blooms. They range from tender annuals to tough perennials. Salvias can benefit from periodic deadheading of fading blooms. Some plants will repeat-bloom only if the old, dying flowers are removed. Once deadheaded, the plant will put its energy into strengthening itself rather than producing seeds. Pruning is defined as the selective removal of parts of a plant. By pruning shrubs regularly, you can better control the size and shape of the plant. In some cases, this will prevent the plant from dying out in the middle of the plant. The method you follow depends on the way the plant grows—from the base of the plant or from an established framework of branches. For pruning, salvias can be categorized into 3 types depending on the plant’s structure and growth habit.



Black & Blue Sage

**Type 1: The Deciduous, Herbaceous Salvias.** This type of salvia doesn’t have woody stems. It includes *Salvia elegans* (Pineapple Sage, Tangerine Sage), *Salvia guaranitica* (Brazilian Sage, Black and Blue Sage), and *Salvia leucantha* (Mexican Bush Sage). We have grown both the Mexican Bush Sage and the Black and Blue Sage. Our Black and Blue Sage was strikingly beautiful, but unfortunately, didn’t make it through its first winter. However, the

Mexican Bush Sage has been a consistent bloomer in our garden. With these salvias

the old growth eventually dies out and the fresh new growth emerges from the base of the plant. They have softer stems will either die off and/or freeze. These types of salvias are better pruned in spring because the old growth will protect the fleshy new growth over the winter. Make sure to clean out some of the dead material at the base of the plant or you will run the risk of the plant rotting.



Mexican Bush Sage

**#2 The Herbaceous Salvias with Woody Stems.** This category includes *Salvia greggii* (Autumn Sage), *Salvia coccinea* (Scarlet Sage), *Salvia farinacea* (Mealy blue sage, Henry Duelberg Sage, Augusta Duelberg Sage), and *Salvia microphylla* (Hot Lips Salvia). These are the shrubby salvias. We've



Augusta Duelberg Salvia



Hot Lips Salvia

successfully grown Hot Lips Salvia, Henry Duelberg Salvia, and Augusta Duelberg Salvia. These can be dead headed any time after blooms are spent. For the Duelberg salvias, we tend to prune them back a little after flowering but not all the way to the ground. Take them back to at least where the first set of foliage starts on the flower stem. This could be a pinch or you can take them down further if they need it. Some sites recommend pruning down to about 3 to 6 inches.



Henry Duelberg Salvia

We've never done that with this type of salvia. We wait until new growth starts and prune the old woody stems down to the ground. The Hot Lips Salvia is a plant that came with the house when we purchased it. It is filled with thick, woody branches. As it aged, the center died back. We have left it as is. If it were a younger plant, we would have done periodic pruning to maintain a more pleasing look.

Now, we prune around the edges to help the outer growth hide the unsightly inner parts. It looks better from a distance.

**Type 3: Rosette-growing, herbaceous perennials.**

Rosette-type salvia plants grow stems out of a circle of leaves close to the ground. Tall flower spikes form on these stems. Vista Red Salvia is an example that grows in our area, but it is not perennial here. The rosette salvia we have in our garden area is the perennial *Salvia lyrata* or 'Purple Volcano'. The plant grows 6-12 inches wide. The flower stalks rise about 10 inches above the rosette. Some gardening sites refer to this as a weed and I have to admit when we moved to this area, I spent countless hours pulling this plant out of the grass and our inherited cottage garden. I retreated indoors in the heat of the summer and later, was pleasantly surprised by the display of white-tipped purple flower spikes that rose above



the purple-bronze leaves. In late summer and fall the leaves turn a beautiful deep purple. Cut the stems to the ground in fall. The second round of buds will fade by the end of fall. Prepare the salvia for winter by locating the basal foliage, which is the circular cluster of leaves on the ground. The salvia's flower stalks grow out of it. Snip all of the remaining stems right above these leaves. After trimming the stalks, only the leaves and possibly a small amount of stalk should remain. Be sure to take out any dead plant material you notice, since it can prevent light from reaching the bottom of the plant.

There are several advantages to pruning your Salvia. Pruning removes weak or thin stems. It can shape a plant to give it a more attractive, less crowded appearance. Plants will be rejuvenated by removing dead stems. Pruned plant material should be picked up off the ground. Trimmed plant material left on the ground could eventually encourage disease. Final advice! Be gentle, more is definitely not better when pruning.