

**Plant Mexican Bush Sage for Perennial Dependability
and Brighten the Fall Landscape**
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Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Extension, Leon County

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One of my favorite plants comes into its own in the fall. The beautiful Mexican bush sage (*Salvia leucantha*) is a showstopper with its white flowers that protrude from velvety purple or lavender-blue calyces (outer covering or protective leaves of a flower). Individual flowers are 1" - 2" long and are arranged in whorls up stems that are 6" - 12" long and held well above the foliage.

All summer the Mexican bush sage has been growing and filling in its place in the landscape. Now it stands at about three feet tall and wide. Soft, grayish, lance-shaped leaves are 1" - 5" long and willow like. They are distinctly velvety on top, and the whitish undersides flash in the slightest breeze. The soft outline of the shrub provided a pleasant companion to other plants that bloomed in summer. Now, however, the purple spikes are demanding their turn in the spotlight.

As its name implies, this late summer and fall bloomer hails from Mexico . In its native habitat and in south Florida and other tropical areas, Mexican bush sage blooms all summer. Here it gets killed to the ground each winter, but it returns reliably from the roots and spends all summer growing to blooming size. Generally hardy to about 25°F, it may be grown as a low maintenance annual in areas north of here. Protection from the worst of our winter is achieved by protecting the roots and crown with a layer of organic mulch such as pine needles or pine bark.

This drought tolerant plant prefers sunny, well-drained sites and will usually survive with no supplemental irrigation. It can be used as massed bedding plant, a container plant in large pots, as part of a mixed perennial border, as a landscape specimen, or in almost any landscape situation that suits its cultural needs.

Propagation is easily accomplished by root cuttings or stem cuttings, so if you have a friend or neighbor who grows Mexican bush sage, ask for a few cuttings. Both you and the grower will benefit, because pruning in early summer promotes an abundance of late summer and fall flowering spikes. The subsequent regrowth produces a sturdier, more compact plant as well.

Fuzzy calyces are the main show. They persist after the flowers fall and are often used in everlasting arrangements since the calyces retain their color after drying. I've been known to cut a bouquet when frost threatens and bind the stems together with a rubber band. After hanging in my airy laundry room for a few weeks, these stems are ready to be placed in arrangements that will last throughout the winter.

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For gardeners who dislike bicolored plants—though I can't imagine such an instance—Mexican bush sage is available in solid colors. The cultivars 'Midnight' and 'Purple Velvet' have dark purple calyces and flowers, so they are all one color.

The best time to plant the *Salvia leucantha* is in the early fall or early spring. If planted in fall, best results will be had if you plant a one gallon or larger container. If you buy the plant in a container smaller than a gallon, the plant may not have enough root mass to become established by winter. For spring planting however, a smaller container will be fine.

After transplanting, water the plant before the soil becomes dry. Giving it a deep watering at least once a week should be ample until it becomes established. Then it is drought tolerant. This plant is very easy to grow and moderately fast growing as well, so specimens planted this fall should provide some enjoyment before the cold weather begins.

Hummingbirds and butterflies also love this plant. Keep that in mind when you decide where to plant it. Put it near where you sit often so you can watch who comes to dinner.