

## Select Savvy Salvia for a Stunning Border



Photos: 1) Mexican bush sage (*Salvia leucantha*) provides a fall-blooming accent around this Tallahassee mailbox. (photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension). 2) Hummingbirds visit most types of salvia, such as this *Salvia guaranitica*. (Photo from lihummer.com)

Marie Harrison is a Master Gardener Volunteer with the University of Florida IFAS Extension in Okaloosa County . For more local gardening information, visit the UF-IFAS Extension website for Leon County at <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu>

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**M**y most recent infatuation (speaking strictly of plants) has been with members of the *Salvia* genus. As you might guess, I'm off on another search and find mission trying to find many of these for my collection. It will keep me occupied for a while, for there are more than 700 species of *Salvia*. Such a diversity of sizes, shapes and colors are available that it makes the head swim.

All belong to the *Lamiaceae* (mint) family. They are very pest free and are fantastic plants for attracting hummingbirds and butterflies to the garden. Many are suited to dry, poor soil, while others grow in bogs. Surely there's a salvia to suit any need.

Some of my favorites are the ones that bloom all summer. Among this group are the mealy-cup sages such as *Salvia farinacea x longispicata* 'Indigo Spires' and *S. farinacea* 'Victoria'. 'Indigo Spires' can reach three to five feet in height and width. The flower wands are almost two feet long and appear from early summer to frost. 'Victoria' grows a more modest two feet tall, but purple spires are borne prolifically, making this a very fitting selection for a long-blooming display.

This summer I added eyelash leafed Sage (*Salvia blepharophylla*) to my garden. It grows to about two feet tall, and although it sends out a few suckers from the base, it is not invasive. It is drought and frost tolerant, has orange-scarlet flowers, and is suitable for hot, humid areas. It is recommended for a beginner's garden. Such characteristics make it nearly fail-proof for Florida gardens. Mine has bloomed all summer long, and hummingbirds visit it frequently.

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Another recently acquired favorite is *Salvia guaranitica* 'Argentine Skies'. This long-blooming perennial grows 3-4 feet tall and rewards us with anise scented foliage and spikes of sky blue flowers from summer to first frost. *Salvia guaranitica* 'Black and Blue' is another beautiful member of the species. It has deep, dark blue flowers that grow out of almost black calyxes. These salvias do best in full sun with deep but not too frequent watering.

Eagerly awaited are the colorful spires of the fall-blooming salvias. Forsythia sage (*Salvia madrensis*) puts on brilliant yellow spires of flowers from late fall through early winter. One of our largest salvias, it can reach much as 10 ft tall with a spread of 4-5 ft. It has large, bright green, heart shaped, rather rough leaves. Like many of the large-leafed sages, it thrives in part shade. Give it plenty of room and prepare to stake it to keep it from falling over.

All summer long the *Salvia leucantha* (Mexican Bush Sage) has grown and decorated the border with its soft grayish foliage. In the autumn when most of the other plants are getting tired, Mexican bush sage comes into its own. It grows in a loose, spreading mound up to 2-4 ft tall and wide. The leaves are lance shaped, like willow leaves, 1-5 in. long, puckery on top and white-wooly underneath. White flowers extend from velvety purple or lavender-blue calyxes. Some cultivars of Mexican bush sage have flowers the same color as the purple calyxes.

Not to be forgotten among my favorites is the fragrant pineapple sage (*Salvia elegans*). Its foliage has the delightful scent of pineapple and grows to a bush three or more feet tall and wide. In fall it produces lovely, bright red, tubular flowers much favored by hummingbirds.

Of course, the sage that I grow in the herb garden is *Salvia officinalis*. This is the aromatic herb that is often used to spice up the turkey and dressing. It is available in the familiar two-foot shrubby bush of dull gray color, but cultivars such as 'Tricolor', 'Icterina', and 'Purpurea' with gold or purple leaves spice up the herb garden and the turkey. Fall is an excellent time to add these sages to the garden.

With so much variety, it is surprising that salvia is not in every garden. Butterflies, hummingbirds, and bees by the dozens are attracted by the spikes of tubular flowers. Some can hold their own at the back of the border mingled with other flowers or shrubs, while others can be used in front of the border. They can be grown in containers and are useful as cut flowers. Almost no other group of plants offers so much for so little. Why not give them a try?

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