

Home & Garden Education Center



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EXTENSION

2019 – Year of the Hardy Salvia

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Sometimes the workhorses in our gardens are overlooked and other times, gardeners are just not aware of all the wonderful attributes a plant is endowed with. This is one of the reasons that The Garden Bureau, a non-profit, horticultural education organization, each year selects an annual, perennial, vegetable and bulb to showcase. *Salvia nemorosa*, more commonly referred to as hardy salvias, stole the show this year as the 2019 Perennial of the Year.

The genus salvia is a vast one with more than 700 species. Salvias are members of the mint family and you can tell by their square stem and opposite, somewhat oval, often serrated leaves. Many leaves are scented. Salvias fall into two groups - the culinary and medicinal species often referred to as sages, and the ornamental annual and perennial types.

Most often if a salvia plant is mentioned, the number one vision that comes to most people's minds is that fairly ubiquitous, bright red salvia bedding plant sold at just about every place plants are sold in the spring. Recent developments created new offerings in dark purple, salmon, cream, bi-colors and other. While these are tough bedding plants, they are annuals.

Hardy or perennial salvias are renowned for the wonderful blue and purple hues they add to perennial beds and borders. These plants originated in woodland areas in Eurasia and were originally classified as *S. nemorosa* from the Latin meaning 'of woods'. The meadow salvia *S. pratensis* inhabited similar areas and the two could cross both naturally and under controlled situations resulting in hybrids such as *S. x sylvestris*, *S.x superba* and others, which are often referred to *S. nemorosa* in the nursery trade.



Image by Dawn Pettinelli

If Latin nomenclature is not your thing, look to cultivar and variety names when selecting plants for the garden. 'East Friesland', 'May Night' and 'Rhapsody in Blue' are some great choices for blue to purplish flowers. Like all blues, they contrast well with white, orange and/or yellow flowering perennials in the garden. For a softer

hued planting, mix with pale or medium pinks, dark and light purples and creamy whites. New 'Perfect Profusion' salvia from Proven Winners has icy, pale blue flowers just perfect for a pastel garden bed.

While not as numerous as the blues, there are several pink and white flowering salvias. 'Pink Delight' and 'Sensation Rose' are both fairly compact with delightful soft and bright pink blossoms, respectively. 'Snow Hill', a pure white form was developed by the German horticulturist, Ernst Pagel, after WWII, and remains a favorite today. In recent years, there has been a flurry of activity in hardy salvia hybridizing so look for many more new hybrids that are being released each year.

The best reason to grow salvias, aside from their striking blue color, is that they are tough, undemanding plants. Give them a sunny site, a well-drained soil amended with organic matter and moderate amounts of water and they will reward you with a bevy of blossoms. Pollinators such as bees, butterflies and hummingbirds find the flowers attractive and these days many gardeners are seeking to add such plants to their gardens. Deer and rabbits tend to avoid salvias probably because they belong to the mint family.

One of the best qualities of hardy salvias is that they are clump formers and do not spread all over the garden either by self-seeding or by stolons or rhizomes. It is a treat to put a plant in one spot and have it stay there – just ask any gardener who bought some cute little plant only to have it spread throughout their whole garden. Some hardy salvias will self-seed, but not prolifically, while others are sterile.

Plants are sturdy and upright and produce showy, tubular flowers on spikes rising 12 to 24 inches or so from the crowns. The flowers are two-lipped in shape and curiously contain a mechanism that deposits pollen on the back of visiting bees so they can pollinate other flowers that they visit.

Right about now, your hardy salvias should be in or entering full bloom. Descriptions often tout their blooming period from June to frost but they leave out one important detail. Once plants finish blooming and the blossoms start to brown, cut them off at the base and fertilize the plants. This should give you another batch of blooms in about 6 to 8 weeks. Depending on the length of the growing season, I have gotten 3 sets of flower stalks from some plants.

Since not all perennial salvias come true from seed, your best bet to make more plants is through division. This can be done early in the spring or in September if you have not cut back your plants so they are no longer blooming. Propagating nurseries take cuttings, which serious gardeners may want to give a try.

For blue-hued, pollinator-luring, low maintenance plants, hardy salvias are tough to beat. Add a few to your garden beds whenever renovating or when creating new one. For information on hardy salvias or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.