

Celebrating Salvias

Tall, short, blue, pink, red or whatever colour, tough, long and free flowering, scented leaves, bird and bee attracting – too good to be true? The salvia family can provide all this. It includes the edible herb sage (*salvia officinalis*), annual and perennial forms, low plants and tall shrubs. There are more than 900 species of salvias which belong to the mint family (*Lamiaceae*). According to Wikipedia, 'The name *Salvia* "salviya" derives from the Latin *salvere* ("to feel well and healthy, health, heal")'. I first fell in love with salvias and realised their garden value and variety when I visited the Geelong Botanic Gardens. They have a registered salvia collection, which includes species from different parts of the world. I recommend you visit the gardens where you will find salvias in different sections, including South African ones in the 21st century arid garden.



Most salvias have a long flowering season from spring to early winter. There are some salvias, such as the cheerful red and white 'hot lips', which are hard to cut back because they seem to flower all year round. The delicate salvia flowers have an upper lip and a lower lip and are arranged in spires. Some are bi-colour, such as the luscious looking 'fruit salad' which has flowers in cream and apricot. Others can have

three colours, which change over their flowering time. The calyx behind the flower can be extremely decorative and a special feature of the plant. 'Megan's Magic' has a white flower with an indigo calyx, 'Waverly' is pink and white with a purple calyx and 'Africana lutea' has sage green leaves, large sienna flowers and lime green calyces which are attractive long after the flowers have finished.

Salvias are extremely hardy and tolerate dry conditions – important for us as we choose plants for our gardens that will look great but suit our climate. They can also cope with heavy rains. In addition, they have evolved to cater for a variety of pollinators, which means that birds as well as bees will visit your plants. It is a beautiful sight to see a tall spire of salvia flowers bending slightly as it is visited by dainty yellow and black New Holland Honey Eaters. If you have a window looking onto a garden, you will be in for a treat if you plant salvias in front of it.

Some salvias are virtually dormant during winter and these are the ones that can be cut back hard (in some cases, nearly to ground level) in late autumn. They will send up strong new growth in spring. Others, generally the larger ones, have their growth season in autumn and flower during winter and spring. Give these plants a cut back when they finish flowering in late spring. All salvias benefit from a tidy up trim to keep them bushy and compact.

Most salvias have scented leaves and this can deter animals from eating them. It also means that many are lovely to brush against in passing. Not all varieties have aromas that appeal to everyone, so crush a leaf to check its scent before you plant one close to a path.



There is a salvia for every spot in the garden. Use size to guide you and then plant them like splashes of paint as you create your desired effect. I have a particularly intense low growing cerise salvia that has flowered for ages and which always grabs my attention and makes me feel like smiling as I pass by. My blue 'African skies' are spectacular combined with yellow and cherry coloured perennials.

Autumn is a good time to plant salvias so that they can get their roots down while it is warm but not too hot. Pop in to our nursery to see some lovely salvias flowering now. We also have beautiful fruit and tomatoes for sale these days – check our facebook page or give us a call on 0403 267 286.

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