

Gardening Etcetera: Sensational salvias

CINDY MURRAY Special to the Daily Sun

As a young adult, I enjoyed reading Zane Grey novels. Along with plots of sinewy cowboys, stampeding cattle, and magnificent horses, his stories offered a glimpse (or so I thought) of the American West in the late 19th century.

One of my favorites was *Riders of the Purple Sage*. In it, Grey tells of lovely shrubs casting a purple haze over the desert landscape for miles on end. And so, whenever my family took a trip to any desert region, I would expect to see sagebrush bearing leaves of purple. But all I saw were sagebrush with blue-green leaves.

Now I know why. Purple sage is not a sagebrush. It's a true sage of the genus *salvia*, with a species name *dorrii*. And yes, it does grow as a low shrub bearing purple flowers during May or June. It thrives in the intermountain region of the West, including hot, desert-like spots in northern Arizona.

Today I will be writing about the true *salvia*, a splendidly multifaceted genus with somewhere around 1,000 species growing throughout the United States. I will highlight my favorite salvias -- some grow as perennials in Coconino County. Others thrive here only as annuals, and I'll start with them.

I love *Salvia greggii* for container landscaping. I prefer the 'Furman's Red' variety, as it displays delicate (in appearance only) red tubular flowers hummingbirds battle over. In my pots, it serves as an airy red, tall backdrop against any variety of mid-to-low-growing flowers. Certain *S. greggii* produce pink flowers, which are equally desirable.

When I truly wish to grab someone's attention, I plant pots of *Salvia splendens* 'Vista Red' against a background of green. 'Vista Red's' dense spikes of tubular flowers remind me of brilliant red flames. I snip off dead blooms to encourage new ones, allowing my plants to thrive until first frost. Note: *S. splendens* is poisonous to dogs.

Next are the annual blue salvias. There are many varieties, and often they're all labeled "blue *salvia*." I purchase whichever ones happen to be available at the time. They're generally spikey, giving my containers or landscape another dimension of height, and they can function as either a backdrop or a centerpiece.

Let's segue onto the salvias living year-round in higher elevations like Flagstaff: the perennials. My experience with perennial salvias is that you need to keep them a bit protected from very cold temperatures and windy sites for the first two or even three years. I also water them every week during hot, dry summers.

I find it worth the trouble, especially with 'Raspberry Delight', a native hybrid. (I believe it can be purchased only through High Country Gardens.com). The first summer I had 'Raspberry

Delight', I put it in a pot where it flourished along with another flowering plant. Then I transplanted it in my backyard that fall. It's been thriving there, in partial shade, for several years, and its raspberry-pink blooms are delightful.

A couple years ago, on the recommendation of other Coconino Master Gardeners, I purchased *Salvia sylvestris* 'Blue Hill'. I chose a hot and sunny site for it, and when temperatures spike, I water it a couple times a week. It bloomed nicely last year, even though it bore a hefty load of snow over the winter. I'm now waiting enthusiastically for my 'Blue Hill' to attain its eventual mature height and width of two or three feet.

Seeing *Salvia pachyphylla*, a.k.a. Mojave sage or mountain desert sage, in a fellow Master Gardener's yard, I thought, "This gorgeous plant can't be native, it looks nearly tropical!" But it is native to Arizona, California, and Nevada, growing on high, dry rocky slopes. The leaves are sweet-scented and silvery-green, and the flowers are showcases of blue tubular blooms held in deep pink bracts. The plant takes a couple of seasons to come into its true glory.

By now it should be apparent to you that I love salvias. Here's a bit of information for those of you who might want to plant some of your own: Most of these sages prefer poor soils, need little water, attract bees and hummingbirds, and once mature, they become small shrubs.

To be honest, I'm still in search of fields of *Salvia dorrii*. At least now I know where to look. But perhaps the long stretches described in Grey's novel were a myth in the first place.

SKYWARN is a program that trains volunteers to help keep their local communities safe by providing timely and accurate reports of monsoon season weather to the National Weather Service. (Video courtesy of Flagstaff NWS)

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