

# GROWERTALKS

## Guest Column

8/1/2023

## The Glorious Stages of Salvia

*Lowell Halvorson*

Salvia sales are growing nationally, but it's not the usual names leading the way—it's the wide array of new products hitting the market, gaining share and developing a genuine audience. The old money is still there, don't get me wrong, but new money is bringing in the new growth.

Why is this? One broad reason is “deershifting.” Retailers pull back from deer-tasty categories when their customers become discouraged over high nibble rates. My neighbors see a parade of deer, bunnies and other critters passing through their yards. This is the human/wildlife interface in the heart of urban suburbia, an hour northeast of New York City. My neighborhood buys plants deer don't eat—one of them is salvia.

Salvia benefits from deershifting not because it's pungent, but because it's malleable. The genus has 20-plus species and so many traits it functions more like a Lego kit with a huge range of swappable, improvable parts. We're not talking small variances in color or size, but significant movements into new hybrids and all-around better series.

### Commercial landscape work

For a peek into your local housing market, pull out your sales of May Night. The two are nearly synonymous, falling and rising together. As a rule, the plant is a set-and-forget product with a lifespan measured in decades. Among breeders, then, the hustle is to out-*nemorosa* May Night and its old-school companions.

In the retail channel, especially the IGCs, look at the Marvel series. They're the difference between standing on the street and standing on the stage. They present well on the bench and in the garden, plussing the best *nemorosa* features, and there's nothing quite like a Rose Marvel performance. It's the best pink salvia in the business.

Landscape work requires more of a commanding Linda Ronstadt delivery. Blue By You comes to mind with its bright, vibrant colors; big, showy blooms and stiff, tall stems. It also has a stronger crown and root system to push the performance over the top.

- **Old-school sales:** May Night, East Friesland, Caradonna, Blue Hill, Snow Hill, Marcus

- **New-school improvements:** Marvel, Blue By You, Lyrical, New Dimensions

### Salvias on a hot tin roof

*S. nemorosas* get roughed up by Southern heat, so the preferred landscape selection is *S. greggii*—Texas sage that grows with an open look. The base *greggii* in common use is red, but improvements like the Mirage series refine it for commercial use. An important benefit is the expanded range of blues, white, pinks and purples for landscape designers. The color is very different, heavy like fog, and the flowers are small, but there are so many of them they

color the air.

For bulk, nothing beats Mystic Spires. It has *farinacea*-style blooms—something you've seen on Victoria Blue, but the species beefs up to “Salvia the Barbarian” when crossed with *longispicata*. In the landscape, Mystic Spires gets about 24 to 36 in. square, filling a big bed quickly. For a similar look, but lower, switch to its mild-mannered form Mysty. Mirage sizes up between the two.

- **S. greggii-style:** Mirage, Radio Red
- **S. farinacea-style:** Victoria Blue (short), Mysty (medium), Mystic Spires (tall)

## Torch singers for gardens & containers

Although Black & Blue opened the door with its distinctive *guaranitica*-style blooms, the newer series such as Bloom and Bodacious followed it by pushing up the stem counts, bulking up the plants and spreading the colors into both cool and warm tones. These are the torch singers of the business. Sitting between two big stands of Purple & Bloom was the easiest way to capture hummingbird and bee photos.

Then there are the hybrids that mix-and-match traits to develop their unique voice, such as the mashup of standards like the Skyscraper series (images the hoods of *guaranitica* with the colors of *splendens*) or the improv scat that is the Vibe series (*jamensis*-style trumpets crowded over the top in a *viola*-style coverage). Since they're salvias, they work in the soil, but also style well in pottery.

- **S. guaranitica:** Hummingbird Falls, Blooms, Bodacious, Rockin'
- **Hybrids:** Skyscraper, Roman Red, Vibe (*jamensis* look), Wendy's Wish (*buchananii*)
- **S. splendens:** Vista, Mojave, Sizzler, Grandstand, Saucy

The big splash of the season goes to the new-to-market Hummingbird Falls, a salvia designed specifically as a basket product. Stems tilt at steep angles, in the manner of spreading angelonia. It blooms more to the side than the top, so dramatic color drapes and trails over the side of the basket. Because the stem counts are boosted, the color coverage is high.



Above: Lancelot is a xeric salvia with leaves like dusty miller.  
Left: Hummingbird Falls is a *guaranitica*-style bred for baskets. A sensation in salvias.

## For dry establishments

Two varieties are deeply xeric: Santa Barbara (*leucantha*) and Lancelot (*canariensis*). You can work with these salvias in the Colorado River basin, but other regions should also look at them. Water emergencies famously hit the Midwest a few years ago, and even my little New England town has mandated a permanent lawn and garden watering schedule in the summer.

Santa Barbara is larger, more landscape-style and leans toward a nepeta look. A few big plants will knit together into a large blanket of salvia color.

Lancelot is shorter, more distinctive and better suited as a specimen salvia. The leaves are deeply serrated and frosted in the style of dusty miller, crowned overhead with strong, bushy tops. Lancelot stays in color for the full summer season.

## The pollinator headlines

All salvias excel at the pollinator job. Each floret is an individual feeding station, so each stem can handle a large

number of visitors. A strong nectar pump within the plant quickly refreshes each feeding station. Long-tongued beneficials return to a planting again and again, which explains salvia's high visitation rate.

You can see why the demand for salvias has grown over the past decade. Deershifting opened spots in the garden for deer-distasty plants. Breeders opened new looks in new places by refining the favorites and developing new crosses. And, finally, salvia's recognized ability as a pollinator star attraction brought in the crowds. **GT**

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