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## From My Garden

### The great family of Salvias

by H. E. Bates



The great family of salvias, from the common *S. officinalis* of your sage and onion stuffing to the grenadier scarlet of *S. splendens*, so well known as a bedding plant, is not only big. It is vast. I myself grow, or have grown, 25 or 30 species, and am always snooping, like the professional gentleman who is said to have smuggled *S. vaticans* out of the gardens of Vatican City in the folds of his umbrella, for more.

Indigenous to Britain are another four, of which a great favourite of mine, *S. pratensis*, also colours with a great purple flourish all the springtime sub-alpine meadows of Europe.

From scalding Mephistophelian scarlet to the electric gentian blue of *S. patens*, the salvia colour range is wider, probably, than that of any other family, excepting perhaps polyanthus and anemones. The intermediate salvia colour chart provides a whole skein of blues, purples, lavenders, crimsons and pinks, together with yellow and silver, not all of which are provided by flowers but instead by bracts which, as in *Bougainvillea*, make the more striking display.

Two favourites of mine in this section are *S. turkistanica* Vatican variety and *S. sclarea*, where a delicate combination of lavender and pink, lasting the entire summer, gives the lie to Reginald Farrer's sneer about 'leafy weeds'.

We have come to appreciate leaves much better today and have learned to use even their coarseness to beautiful advantage. Thus, to me, the big crinkled leaves of *S. turkistanica* Vatican make an appeal no less charming than the five-foot spires of flower. *S. superba*, formerly called *S. virgata nemorosa*, and of which there are now sturdier, shorter variations, also belongs to this group and provides a positively monumental pyre of purple and near copper all summer long.

Never, in the past, did this highly desirable plant set seed, but now, at long last, there has evolved a type that does.

Leaves that are not only crinkled but brightest silver as in *S. argentea*, and also aromatic: this is another constant salvia characteristic and one which I adore. Everywhere, in gardens public and private, I am continually ferreting about, pinching and sniffing salvia leaves, drawing up that peculiar, sharp, pungent odour, slightly medicinal, refreshing as mint. Thus, on Lake Maggiore, on the Isola Di Brissago, in a charming garden, I found last year a new treasure, *S. leucantha*. Tender, like all its Mexican sisters, it is rather like a larger and paler *S. farinacea*, whose vivid purple stems are covered, as its name indicates, with a white dusty flouriness, like that seen in auriculas.

Mexico, indeed, provides a whole crop of species, all tender in this country, including *S. farinacea* itself; *S. involucrata*, a pink giant with leaves of striking richness, and *S. fulgens*, not the least of whose virtues is the lateness of its flowering, together with its hairy, warm crimson flowers. This common tenderness should not deter. *S. farinacea* can be raised with ease as an annual; *S. fulgens* and *S. involucrata* can be over-wintered in greenhouse or frame from autumn

Salvia farinacea



cuttings and will make large plants, the one of four feet and the other of five, from cuttings taken in spring.

*S. splendens*, the scarlet grenadier of public parks, and *S. coccinea*, a smaller jewel-like relative of the same colour, may also be treated as annuals, as may *S. patens* and its lavender variety; both of these eventually make tubers that can be winter-stored. Into the annual section also come *S. hornimum*, again of the bract division, in this case purple, and its newer pink and crimson varieties. All these are specially of value in dull wet summers and indeed one of the family's greater virtues is that, in spite of tenderness and tropical origin, all revel as much in rain as in sun, a habit I only wish such summer beauties as petunias, gazanias, verbenas and so on would share.

Finally, in case it should be thought that I am uncritically daft about the family of salvias, I am bound to add that I have never been able to generate any great enthusiasm for *S. Jurisicii*. I greatly prefer our native *S. pratensis*, of which I never think without seeing it, in my mind's eye, in its full June glory in alpine meadows, with its even more glorious companions, the buttery balloons of trollius, above which, a thousand or more feet up, the delicate crowded splendours of soldanellas, alpenrose, gentians and that most chaste of anemones, *A. alpina*, take your breath away.

Nor used I to be very certain of *S. candelabrum*, which seemed to me to have a lot of candelabra but not much else. But at last, with patience, I have seen it mature to the beauty I once expected it to have. It has a worthy companion in *S. haematodes*, a rich mauve Grecian princess whose one failing is that her reign lasts for only three weeks of high summer.

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Salvia hornimum

