

Sage, *Salvia officinalis*



Sage is an attractive culinary herb.

Sage is an attractive culinary herb. It has been cultivated for both culinary and medicinal purposes for many centuries in Europe. It is hardy in zones 4-10.

The species can grow to 2½ feet tall, but many cultivars are much shorter. The opposite leaves vary in color from gray to gray-green, or may be purple or golden. They are pebbly, slightly fuzzy, and up to 5" long. The stems are green at first, but become woody in the second year. It tends to be a short-lived perennial and is often best replaced every few years.

Common sage blooms in early summer. The camphor-scented, bluish-lavender to pink-lavender flowers are borne in whorls on short, upright flower spikes. Each flower

Salvia officinalis is an aromatic, rather woody perennial shrub in the mint family (Lamiaceae) native to the shores of the northern Mediterranean. Its common names include culinary sage, common garden sage, or garden sage. The word "sage" has come to mean "wise" or "a wise or learned person." Its scientific name, *Salvia*, means "to be in good health", "to save", or "salvation" while *officinalis* is an old reference to an herb store, pharmacy, or drugstore. Sage is often mentioned as the herb of immortality, domestic virtue, health, and wisdom. Sage was a sacred ceremonial herb of the Romans. It has been cultivated for both culinary and medicinal



Sage leaves have a pebbly texture.



Sage blooming (L), elongating flower spike (C) and close-up of the two lipped flowers (R).

has two lips. The flowers are attractive to bees and butterflies and occasionally to hummingbirds.

Sage's soft-colored foliage and profusion of lovely purple-blue flower spikes blend beautifully into any herb garden. The gray leaves of the common varieties contrast nicely with the green



Sage can be very ornamental.

Sage is easy to start from seed (although most named varieties are not available as seed) and it can also be reproduced by layering, by division, or from stem cuttings. To grow from seed, either plant directly in the ground on the average date of last frost or start indoors 6 to 8 weeks before then. Either way the plant may not flower the first year. Layer established branches in the spring and fall, or divide large plants in the spring. Take softwood stem cuttings in summer and root in a sand-peat mixture.

Sage takes 75 days from planting to first harvest. At least twice during the growing season, cut 6-8" from the top of the plants.

Pick the leaves as desired as long as you don't cut back more than half the plant or it will stop producing. Harvest before the plant flowers.



Although fresh sage has a richer and more balanced flavor than dried, it's usually not available during the winter. To preserve fresh sage, chop the leaves, place in an ice cube tray with water, and freeze to use later. To dry sage, tie springs in loose bundles and air-dry in a cool place or place branches on wire racks out of direct sunlight. When dry and brittle, remove the leaves from the stems and store



A ruby throated hummingbird feeding from common sage flowers.

of many other plants, so sage doesn't have to be relegated to the herb or vegetable garden. It mixes well in perennial borders and in cottage gardens. Try planting sage in the border, especially intermixed with pink flowering plants. The smaller varieties can also be grown as container plants to be brought inside for a supply of fresh sage through the cold winter months.

Sage grows best in a sunny location with well-drained soil. It will tolerate drought and poor soil fertility, but will produce better with consistent water. Prune the plant in the spring and a few times through the growing season to encourage young shoots with a strong flavor and to prevent it from becoming leggy and twiggy (and going to flower which isn't desired if using as a culinary herb). Space plants 18 to 24 inches apart and divide every couple of years to rejuvenate the plants.



Seedling sage plants.

in an airtight container. Hang bunches of sage in the kitchen for a nice herbal ambiance. You might even try using sage in an herbal wreath.

Sage has few pests when grown in well-drained soil. Good air circulation will reduce potential problems with foliar diseases. Some possible problems include slugs, spider mites, spittle bugs, root rot and wilt.

There are many different cultivars of sage which differ in leaf size, plant habit and leaf color. The purple or golden varieties make delightful ornamental houseplants. They're smaller plants than the green or gray varieties, but the flavor of the leaves is just as good. Some of the more commonly offered varieties include:

- 'Aurea' – has chartreuse-yellow leaves enhanced by dark green areas around the veins. Only hardy to zone 6.
- 'Berggarten' – was discovered growing at the Berggarten Mansion in Germany. It has larger-than-average, gray-blue silvery, round leaves and a bushy habit that stays full down to the base of the stems. It is mildew resistant. Hardy to zone 5.
- 'Icterina' – has golden variegated leaves and is used mainly as an ornamental.
- 'Compacta' – has smaller leaves and more compact habit than regular sage, growing only 10 inches high, but with the same sage flavor. It is excellent for small areas, rockeries, and borders. It is propagated by cuttings only; seeds are unavailable.
- 'Holt's Mammoth' – is similar to the standard variety, but the leaves are larger.
- Purple sage ('Purpurea' or 'Purpurascens') – has purple leaves that are strongly flavored and grows 18 inches tall. It is also nice as an ornamental to complement yellow blossoms in the garden. Not as winter hardy as common sage (only to zone 6).
- 'Tricolor' – has green leaves edged in white and with rose streaks. It can be grown as a houseplant and is not as hardy as common sage (only to zone 6).



'Berggarten'



'Icterina'



'Purpurascens'



'Tricolor'

Besides these cultivars, there are many other closely related species of sage that can be used as herbs. Clary sage (*S. sclarea*) is a biennial or perennial with long spikes of white, purple, or blue flowers that can reach



Salvia elegans

four feet high. *S. viridis* is an ornamental annual sometimes sold as clary. It produces pink bracts that resemble flowers and make excellent cut or dried flowers, but it has no herbal use. Pineapple sage (*S. elegans*) is an annual north of Zone 8 with pineapple-scented foliage and spikes of red flowers in late summer and fall. Its leaves can be used for teas and in fruit salads. Other related herbs include blue sage (*S. clevelandii*) and silver sage (*S. argentea*).

'Tricolor'

There are a multitude of uses for sage including culinary, medicinal, craft and ornamental. In the U.S. most people are familiar with sage in the stuffing for turkeys at Thanksgiving, but it shouldn't be restricted to this use. In other countries sage is used in a variety of sauces, especially with fatty meats. In Italy, the fresh leaves are lightly fried with liver, and rolled up with ham and veal in saltimbocca. In Germany and Belgium, the leaves are added to eel and other oily fish dishes. And in Middle Eastern countries the leaves are used liberally in salads.



'Tricolor' sage combined with fennel and purple basil in an herb container.

Try using fresh sage with cheese or chicken dishes, or use it as a dry rub on pork chops before grilling. Use the flowers in salads, or make sage vinegar and sage butter. Dip and fry whole leaves in batter or young leaves in cream, and eat with sugar and orange.

Shelley Ryan of the WI Gardener program on WI Public TV offers this recipe for fried sage leaves:

Deep Fried Sage Leaves	
<p>½ cup white flour salt ½ cup sparkling mineral water 1 tbsp vegetable oil 1 egg white 15 large sage leaves oil for frying</p>	
<p>Mix flour with a speck of salt. Add mineral water and oil; blend. Gently stir in one egg white that has been whipped until almost stiff. Dip sage leaves in mixture and fry in hot oil (about 350 degrees) until browned. Watch carefully, as the light batter browns quickly. Remove from the oil, drain on paper towels, and serve warm. This recipe can easily be doubled.</p>	

While sage is more commonly thought of as a culinary herb, it is also has medicinal and cosmetic uses. Sage tea is purported to have antiseptic qualities good for sore throats, aid in digestion, and may boost insulin action. A poultice of sage leaves mixed with saliva supposedly provides relief from the itching and swelling of insect bites, a strong infusion can be used to darken gray hair, it is frequently mentioned as an antiperspirant, and it has been reported to relieve a plethora of other ills, such as diarrhea, coughs and colds, snake-bite, and for wart removal.

– Susan Mahr, University of Wisconsin - Madison

Additional Information:

- *Salvia officinalis* – on the Missouri Botanic Garden's Kemper Center for Home Gardening website at www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/gardens-gardening/your-garden/plant-finder/plant-details/kc/m260/salvia-officinalis.aspx
- *Salvia officinalis* – on the Floridata website at www.floridata.com/Plants/Lamiaceae/Salvia%20officinalis/609
- Botanical.com, A Modern Herbal: Sages – at www.botanical.com/botanical/mgmh/s/sages-05.html#com