

Features

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The Salvia Superpower

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Salvia's appeal is broad and deep—native bees, bumblebees, honeybees, hummingbirds and other beneficial pollinators drink from the generous fountains these super plants provide. If you support the beneficials, have a pollinator line, or just work with kids and gardening, it's important to include salvia in the heart of your program. Several features of the blooms make this attractive plant a hero.

Pictured: Summer salvias like Snow Nymph, Lady in Red and Mystic Spires generally come from the southern tender perennials. They grow fast enough to

make effective hillside displays. The trick is to intermix several types together in the same bed. Since they tend to cycle their colors, they'll overlap their peak blooms.

A broad landing pad is a big help to pollinators. This is true for just about all sizes of insects, since it's easier to gather nectar while resting than it is to struggle for some refreshment. Most salvia flowers have a large lobe on the lower petal that extends outward like a stiff platform. It easily holds the weight of smaller bugs and larger ones up to a point; the biggest bugs cheat, but more on that later.

High-Capacity Seating

Another great feature of salvia is the twirl of florets around the stem. Each floret is like a punch bowl of nectar at a large buffet table. A single stem can handle multiple customers at once, which happens. One customer can also try a little bit of everything, as many of us are prone to do. Fast food restaurants employ a similar tactic with four chairs crowded around each tiny table. They pack the guests in, serve them up quickly and move them out the door: the salvia blossom special.

Though the individual florets look small they recharge quickly. As a central pipeline, the stem draws up sugars and treats brewing down inside the leaves, constantly topping off the refills on fountain drinks inside the flowers.

Perennial salvias will only offer their blooms once a year, but southern salvias (perennial, but tender) and annual salvias will bloom and rebloom all season long.

Intergeneric salvia is a mix of the two types: it blooms bigger like perennial salvia and it also reblooms frequently, like the annuals. For pollinators, this is the best of both worlds. It means their food keeps coming back all the way to

frost! With salvias, planting an assortment of cultivars in the same bed amps up availability, since all the salvia types cycle through their color at varying frequencies.

Mass Market Appeal

Because the salvia genus is so diverse there are flowers that are tailored to all types of tongues. Some varieties have long, slender tubes with the nectar tucked at the end. Other blooms have short faces and small cups to hold the nectar, built to attract anyone within a certain weight class who might be interested in a bite to eat.

If you plant an assortment of salvia you'll see a wide range of pollinators visit the garden: native bees, honeybees, bumblebees, beetles, hummingbirds and more. Salvia is a generalist and some of the larvae use it as a host plant, plus there are some sneaky pollinators that have figured out how to grab a free ride.

Paying The Bill

Salvia collects a fee in an unusual way. High up where the flower opens are two stamens at the end of long thread-like levers, holding the pollen. As a bee enters the flower, they flex down and dust the back of the insect. This is called the male stage.

When the bee moves on to another flower in the female stage, the stamens are already bent down, expecting the arrival of compatible pollen. By using different lever lengths, various salvias can dust insects in different places, yet the pollens never mix.

This strategy is flexible and works well with insect customers in a range of weight classes, from tiny natives to larger honeybees, as long as they enter the restaurant through the front doors.

There are some bees, however, known as robber bees, who choose an alternative route to the nectar. They're too big to fit through the front of the flower, so they break in through the back. After settling on top of the bloom, they chew a hole in the base and scoop up the food pollen-free!



Pictured clockwise from top left: A bumblebee combing through the salvia florets. They'll land on a stem and spend some time inspecting all the feeding stations before moving on. • Hummingbirds need food on a frequent basis, so they'll visit a salvia stand regularly because of the quick nectar recharge each floret has. The bigger the stand, the better the chance of visitors. • A robber bee bypasses the mouth of the Salvia Black & Bloom because it's too big to fit. It chews a hole at the base to gain access to the nectar. • Attached to a very strong stem are rings of florets, each one a feeding station to an incoming pollinator. Rings are added as the stem grows out.

Here's A Tip

Although famous for its sun performance, salvia has surprisingly good shade qualities as well. It blooms even under a tree, as long as the plants are watered. That's the trick. Less rain reaches plants under a tree because of the leaves above and the roots below ground. If salvia has reasonable access to water, it thrives in shade. In beds with partial sun salvia has no problem blooming at all, so feel free to use it in a wider range of gardens than strictly full sun.

What's On The Menu?

These are some popular species of salvia to enjoy:

- *S. nemorosa* such as May Night. Usually perennial, usually blue and usually spring-blooming.
- *S. greggii* such as Radio Red. A summer-blooming perennial in Texas, but a fast grower used as summer color in the North.
- *S. farinacea* such as Victoria Blue or Mystic Spires. A blue-flowered mound as wide as the plant is tall. Flower spires are thin and wispy.
- *S. guaranitica* such as Black & Blue. Dramatic torch singers with striking black stems. Perennial in the South, drama annual in the North.
- *S. splendens* such as the Vista series. Short annual plants bloom hard from summer to frost. Bright colors include red, purple, cream, salmon and lavender.
- Interspecific such as the Skyscraper series. A mashup of two or more species to combine the best attributes. Sold without an identifying species, these mixes are becoming more common commercially. **GP**

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