NATIVE PLANTS for the Garden

SALVIA ‘BEE’S (and butterflies) BLISS’

by John Whittlesey

Animal interactions have been highlights for me this past year: a leisurely view of a mountain lion strolling below the house early one summer morning; a rather frantic commotion on the deck late one night that, when the light was turned on, revealed a ring tailed cat scaling the downspout after the tilmouse nest; and a momentary sighting of what must have been a falcon that left a whooshing sound in its wake not 15’ above me as it dove down to the creek – the sound and flash of movement startling. These were all energizing experiences, to have glimpses of these animals I share the canyon with, but have never seen before. However the grand highlight, the most intense experience of them all was viewing a blooming bank of Salvia Bee’s Bliss alive with bees and butterflies.

Salvia ‘Bee’s Bliss’ is a supposed hybrid of two California native sages – Salvia sonomensis and S. leucophylla. ‘Bee’s Bliss’ is intermediate between the two parents. It has the spreading nature of S. sonomensis, and the rugged, garden durability of S. leucophylla. It grows to 18” high and spreads readily to 6’ across producing a multitude of flowering stems, each stacked with whorls of lavender-blue flowers. The flowers are the draw that transform this salvia from being just a pretty static landscape plant into a whole living system.

Below Forest Ranch near the bottom of Big Chico canyon is Dulcy Schroder’s beautiful, peaceful, appropriate-to-the-place garden. Approaching her bank of salvia hazy with the lavender flowers, and the movement of scores of butterflies the senses are overwhelmed. The first is visual. To see so many pipevine swallowtail butterflies flitting, floating, drifting among the vertical stems of flowers was a sight I’d never seen. A hundred butterflies is probably not an exaggeration, gently moving over the 300 sq ft of plantings. They were everywhere.
Once my eyes adjusted to the sight and as I moved closer, it was the sound – the buzzing, droning harmonics that commanded attention. The constant hum of bees – mostly bumble bees – but other bees and flies going about their work of collecting pollen and sipping nectar were contributing to this natural symphony. The hundreds of bumble bees, while not deafening, generated a persistent deep hum, punctuated occasionally by the high whine of the fuzzy bee fly and the deep slow buzz of the hefty male carpenter bees, sounding like big rigs downshifting approaching a steep slope.

To sit quietly was to be immersed in the diversity of life this salvia drew into its midst. Besides the pipevine swallowtails, a lone monarch and pale swallowtail came and went, along with a variety of other native bees, besides the bumblebees and a variety of hover flies. There was so much to see and hear and even smell as the volatile oils of the salvia leaves scented the air.

Beyond the religious ecstatic experience Salvia ‘Bee’s Bliss’ in the right location engenders, it is a very practical, useful plant for the garden. It is perfect for covering ground on a hot dry slope. It grows quickly and is very drought tolerant. Light pruning of old flower stems and the occasional stems that die back during the winter.

The gray mat of foliage is livened up when planted amongst large rocks (at least 30” high and wide - much small and they get swallowed up) or between large clumps of deer grass that provide strong contrast throughout the year. It also looks striking when planted at the feet of Fremontodendron whose golden yellow flowers compliment the pale blue of the salvia. Resist the temptation to plant this salvia too close to a path where it will need constant pruning. Give ‘Bee’s Bliss’ some room to spread. It is not a shy plant, rather, it is a plant full of life.