NATIVE PLANTS for the Garden

by John Whittlesey

Native SAGES for the Garden

Walking through the Gateway Science Pollinator Garden in early March, I was surprised to see, in full bloom, *Salvia domii* ‘Gayle Nielsen’ (also sold as ‘Trident’). On this cool overcast day the clusters of intense blue-purple flowers, set densely along the slender woody stems, stood out in what was an otherwise dormant, reemerging landscape. After seeing it growing on steep, exposed talus slopes on the east escarpment of the Warner Mountains in northeastern California, this remarkably beautiful sage seemed out of place in such a tame environment. But such is the nature of California’s native sages. They are at home in rugged, dry, landscapes, yet for the most part adapt very well to home gardens.

California has 19 species of native salvias. Most are shrubby plants, a few are perennials, and two are annuals. In general they are found growing in dry, temperate regions of California. These native salvias offer up some excellent plants for our gardens where they are grown for attractive fragrant foliage, showy flowers and a reliable year round presence. From these 19 species many cultivars and hybrids have been selected and offered by nurseries. Two species grown in our region. *Salvia sonomensis* is seen covering banks along the roadsides in Forest Ranch and Cohasset while the annual chia, *Salvia columbariae* can be found on quick draining gravelly banks on the west side of the valley.

Thriving in hot, dry conditions native sages require little irrigation in our gardens. Good drainage is important. In the winter especially, cold, soggy soils can kill or shorten the life of most salvias, native or non-native.

A few of my favorites for gardens include:

**Cleveland Sage** (*S. clevelandii*) This is a wonderful, senses-filing salvia for the garden. The narrow grey green leaves have an intoxicating, yet difficult to pinpoint fragrance, that local writer, Joan Walters, describes as a ‘waterfall of pungent aromas’ - a fragrance highly appreciated by all who grow it. The showy blue flowers in whorled clusters attract a wealth of wildlife including bees, butterflies and hummingbirds.
**Purple Sage** (*S. leucophylla*) This is a rugged plant that looks attractive throughout the year, enduring heat, drought and poor soils. It has a mounding spreading habit of narrow, silver leaves. The flowers, light rose to lavender-pink are arranged in tight whorls stacked along the flowering stem and are favored by bumblebees.

**White Sage** (*S. apiana*) The white sage is appropriately named for its prominent silvery white leaves and long wands of white flowers. The thick, resinous leaves are powerfully and pungently scented. White Sage has a fairly compact habit, however, the flowering stems can rise to 4 feet extending wildly in all directions. Give it plenty of room.

**Hummingbird Sage** (*S. spathacea*) Unlike the majority of California native salvias, the hummingbird sage is more perennial in habit, spreading underground, colonizing an area with its rhizomatous stems. It forms a dense carpet of large, textured leaves that are slightly sticky and have a distinctively sweet, pungent fragrance. In mid-spring though early summer the flowering stalks rise well above the foliage. The large maroon-red flowers poke out of the dense calyces, which are also tinted with maroon. *S. spathacea* prefers the shade of trees or large shrubs and is an excellent plant to use under oak trees.

**‘Bee’s Bliss’** (hybrid between *S. sonomensis* and *S. leucophylla*). For covering an exposed slope this salvia excels with its sweeping branches that make a lush carpet of narrow gray-green leaves. Blooming in mid to late spring, it produces whorls of light lavender-blue flowers on 18” stems, and as the name suggests it is highly attractive to bees and butterflies.

**S. dorrii** A slender woody plant, *S. dorrii* is covered with small, intensely scented, silver leaves. The flowers, congested in small tight whorls can range from light blue to a deep violet blue and are enhanced by the burgundy colored calyces. *S. dorrii* requires very well drained soil.