



Top: 'Rose Rhapsody'
Middle: 'Swan Lake'
Bottom: 'Twilight Serenade'

crop culture report:

Salvia Ballet Series

The easy-to-grow, first-year flowering Ballet series from Jelitto Perennial Seeds is a lovely collection of four striking colors of the meadow clary sage, *Salvia pratensis*.

By Allen Bush

There are more than 700 salvia species. Chief among them is *Salvia officinalis*, used for culinary flavoring, cutting across a wide spectrum to *Salvia divinorum*, known for its hallucinatory effects. The Silver Sage, *Salvia argentea*, is a Royal Horticultural Society Award of Garden Merit recipient, and *Salvia nemerosa* 'Mainacht' (May Night) was the 1997 Perennial Plant Association's Plant of the Year.

The genus has a nearly worldwide distribution. Popular selections of North American species include *Salvia lyrata* 'Purple Knockout' from the eastern United States and the popular bedding plant *Salvia farinacea* 'Victoria Blue' from the southern United States and Mexico.

Variety Information

Packed basal rosettes of the meadow clary sage produce aromatic, medium-green, wrinkled, oblong leaves that have been traditionally used to flavor beer and wine, but that's not the only buzz. The flowers are pretty nice, too. The distinctively hooded flowers surround upright 20-inch stems from June through August and continue for two months. A second blooming is possible if the spent flowering stems are removed.

Jelitto introduced the Meadow Ballet Blend of mixed colors and the first individual color selection in 2005 — the pink flowering 'Rose Rhapsody' — and more colors followed, including 'Swan Lake', a snowy white. New for 2008 are the intense dark-pink 'Sweet Esmeralda' with a carmine rose lip, much darker in color than the soft pink of 'Rose Rhapsody', and the blue-violet 'Twilight Serenade'. The breeding work on these latest Jelitto introductions began from plants found at Härten Nursery in Northern Germany.

Germination

Seeds can be sown anytime, but it is advantageous to sow between November and March for first-year flowering. (There are 500 seeds per gram; 2 grams per 1,000 seeds. Five grams are recommended to produce a bulky plug.) Sow two to three seeds per cell in 128- or 288-plug trays in a porous, well-drained media with an EC of 1.2-1.5 and 6.0-6.8 pH.

Cover the seeds lightly with vermiculite to maintain higher humidity levels and provide good air circulation. Germination will begin, sometimes irregularly —

but completely — within two to three weeks at 65-70° F. Germination to transplant requires four to six weeks at 60-65° F.

Fertilization

Fertilize with 20-10-20 at 50 ppm following germination. No vernalization is required, but flowering may be more uniform and abundant with four weeks of cool temperatures at an average daily temperature of 40° F.

Transplanting

Transplant one to two plugs into 4½-inch containers (quart-size) or two to three plugs into gallon containers with a porous mix and trace elements. A 13-13-13 slow-release fertilizer can be applied at a rate of ½-teaspoon per 4½-inch container and 1 teaspoon per gallon container.

Cutting back once at transplanting will keep the finished plants more compact. Transplanting to salable plant will take approximately six to eight weeks with an optimum day length of 14 hours.

Forcing

Though there is no current research on forcing flowers, an obvious place to experiment would be providing 16 hours of continuous lighting. During the short days of winter, provide a night interruption of four hours between 10 p.m. and 2 a.m.

Finishing

The blossoms of the Ballet series can be attractive in pathways, borders, rock gardens or in mixed containers with *Knautia macedonica* 'Mars Midget', *Malva moshata* 'Alba' and *Rudbeckia grandiflora* 'Sundance'. It could be an interesting cut flower candidate as well.

Space plants 12-15 inches apart. All Ballet varieties are first-year flowering, and the blossoms attract butterflies. Plants prefer cooler summer climates but have endured the relentless heat and humidity of the Ohio Valley and are adaptable to brief dry periods once established. They are undemanding in any well-drained soil in full sun. Plants are cold hardy from Zones 3 through 8. **GPN**

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