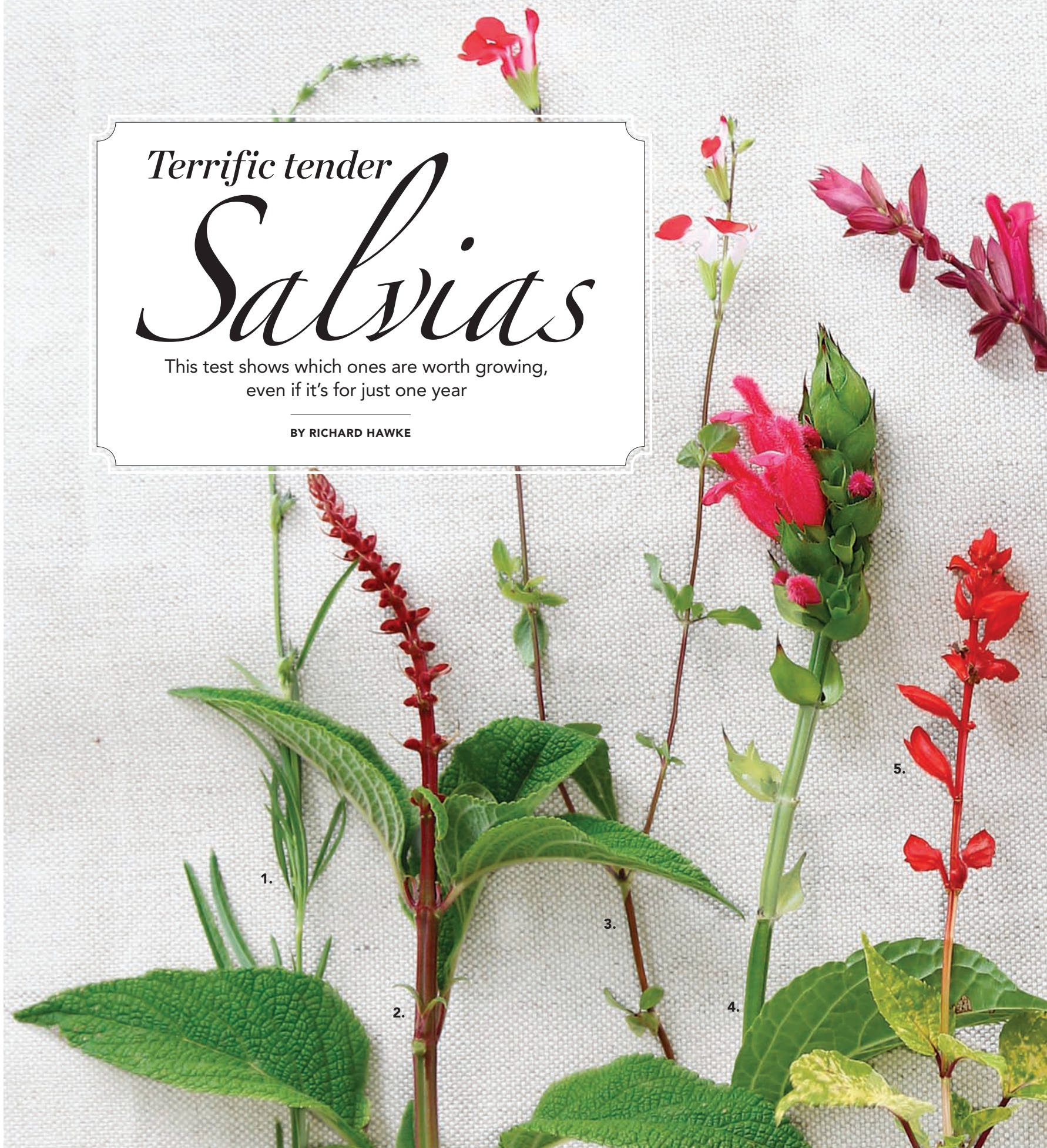


Terrific tender
Salvias

This test shows which ones are worth growing,
even if it's for just one year

BY RICHARD HAWKE



Patience is a virtue, as I've been reminded too many times. Whether that's true or not, I waited over 20 years to evaluate tender salvias, which are hardy in warm regions but not reliable in my Zone 5 winters. My craving for all types of salvias is never-ending—I've grown the hardy perennials and the colorful annuals—but I covet the beguiling tender salvias most of all. Over the past three years, a dazzling salvia-filled bed delighted us at the Chicago Botanic Garden from the warm days of early summer to the first frosts of autumn. Perhaps the long wait made it all the sweeter, because it was truly a colorful, eye-opening, and lively



1. West Texas grass salvia (*S. reptans*)
2. Red velvet salvia (*S. confertiflora*)
3. 'Hot Lips' salvia (*S. microphylla* 'Hot Lips')
4. Bolivian salvia (*S. oxyphora*)
5. 'Dancing Flames' salvia (*S. splendens* 'Dancing Flames')
6. 'Wendy's Wish' salvia (*S. 'Wendy's Wish'*)
7. Andean silver salvia (*S. discolor*)
8. Mirage™ Cherry Red autumn salvia (*S. greggii* 'Balmircher')
9. 'Amistad' salvia (*S. 'Amistad'*)



'Amistad'
salvia



'Santa Barbara'
Mexican bush
salvia



Arctic
Blaze®
Fuchsia
salvia

trial. Months of rainbow-hued flowers, habits great and small, and leaves in diverse colors and shapes—each with its own distinctive scent—are hallmarks of the tender salvias. Our goal was simple: to discover the best tender salvias that are vigorous enough their first year in the garden to make excellent annuals in cooler zones. From early summer to late fall, we enjoyed seemingly endless days of colorful flowery splendor, and we only scratched the surface of the hundreds of lush and exotic selections available by mail order and in garden centers. Rather than settling for off-the-shelf annuals next summer, look for a few choice tender salvias to turn up the seasonal color and drama.

Top performers to try

I first saw Mexican bush salvia (*S. leucantha*) in San Francisco, where its fuzzy purple-white flowers were an unexpected sight in late autumn. Naturally, I wanted it in the trial but thought the late bloom would be a problem for us; instead, its downfall was that its tall, brittle stems snapped in strong winds. While the contrast in flower and calyx colors (sidebar p. 41) is not as striking as the species, **'Santa Barbara' Mexican bush salvia** (*S. leucantha* 'Santa Barbara') is a superior compact selection with light purple flowers and fuzzy, dark purple calyxes. Flower production was exceptionally heavy from early fall to frost. The narrow, downy, gray-green leaves were attractive all sea-

Photos, except where noted: Danielle Sherry. Photos p. 36: millettephotomedia.com (bottom left); Nova Photo Graphik/gapphotos.com (top right); Photo p. 37: Joshua McCullough.



'Golden Delicious'
pineapple salvia

son, which is an important ornamental feature given the late bloom period. The habit was diminutive by comparison to the species—nearly 20 inches shorter and narrower—and, more importantly, the stems were not as fragile.

Arctic Blaze® Fuchsia salvia (*S.* 'Novasalfuc') was one of three strong-blooming selections in a series featuring exceptional habit uniformity. Deep reddish pink flowers with purplish calyces were plentiful from early summer to season's end. All kinds of pollinators were regular visitors on these selections, but bees were particularly busy in midfall. All of the Arctic Blaze® salvias had compact bushy habits with purplish stems, but Arctic Blaze® Fuchsia was the smallest, sporting the best and tightest habit. Unlike some salvias, Arctic Blaze® salvias have square, flexible stems, so breakage was not a problem in our windy site.

'Amistad' salvia (*S.* 'Amistad'), known commonly as the friendship salvia, was the touchstone for comparing tender salvias. From early summer to hard frost, a bounty of purple blossoms nestled in nearly black calyces graced robust stems; it was one of the biggest salvias in the trial. The prodigious floral show and vigorous habit were impressive each summer despite never being fertilized. The large, swarthy flowers were a constant draw for hummingbirds, bees, butterflies, and other beneficial pollinators. If time was short when giving a tour, I made a bee-line to 'Amistad' salvia, since it so perfectly embodied the best qualities of the tender salvias.

The sweetly scented, sumptuous yellow leaves of **'Golden Delicious' pineapple salvia** (*S. elegans* 'Golden Delicious') would be gratifying on their own for most gardeners. But upon seeing

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Salvia
(*Salvia* spp.
and cvs.) >

Sages, as salvias are commonly known, are a large group of plants. When it comes to hardiness, things can get a little tricky, so here's a breakdown of the subcategories they fall into.

- **PERENNIAL SALVIAS:** Hardy to a wide range of zones, returning reliably each year
- **TENDER SALVIAS:** Considered perennials only in warmer locales (Zones 6b–10); in all other areas, they need to be overwintered inside or they will die
- **ANNUAL SALVIAS:** Only live one season, eventually going to seed and dying



Mystic Spires Blue salvia



West Texas
grass salvia

its fiery red flowers arching over the radiant foliage, you would understand that something was missing. Unfortunately for gardeners in the far north, 'Golden Delicious' begins blooming almost too late except in mild autumns with a late frost. If you are lucky and the weather holds, the full glory of the sultry, dark red flowers blazing above the golden foliage is awe-inspiring. The leaves can scald in strong sunlight, so some afternoon shade is best, especially in warmer regions. 'Golden Delicious' won't disappoint, whether in a mixed container, massed, or on its own.

With its pungent, fine-textured grassy foliage and strong shrubby habit, **West Texas grass salvia** (*S. reptans*) carried the show for most of the summer. Long before one flower ever appeared, plants reached a bushy 39 inches tall and wide. The cobalt blue flowers began opening in midsummer and

Photos: Jonathan Buckley (p. 38, right); S. & O/gapphotos.com (p. 39, top right); millettephotomedia.com (p. 40, top left); Bill Johnson (p. 40, top center and bottom); Michael Howes/gapphotos.com (p. 40, top right); Martin Hughes-Jones/gapphotos.com (p. 41, top right); illustration: Kate Gosselein.



were an exquisitely cool blue that attracted much attention from visitors despite the flowers' small size. West Texas grass salvia is the only salvia that proved to be truly cold-hardy in Chicago. This was one of my favorites every summer due to its delicate leaves and tidy habit, but the late blue flowers were my true weakness.

Mystic Spires Blue salvia (*S.* 'Balsalmisp') was not originally planned for the trial, but my friend Janice urged me to add it. I'm so glad I took her advice. Tall spires of purple-blue flowers with violet calyces adorned compact, well-branched plants from late spring to frost. Mystic Spires Blue and 'Indigo Spires' (*S.* 'Indigo Spires')—look-alikes of a sort—were planted side by side, so comparing them was easy. In midfall when pollinators were largely ignoring 'Indigo Spires', Mystic Spires Blue was flutter with butterflies and humming with bees. The prolific floral stems made up about half of its modest height. Had it been on its own, the heftier 'Indigo Spires' may have garnered all my attention, but along with the pollinators, I liked Mystic Spires Blue better.

Autumn salvia (*S. greggii*) was well represented in the trial by 27 selections with flowers in lovely shades of red, pink, violet, purple, and creamy white. **Mirage™ Cherry Red autumn salvia** (*S. greggii* 'Balmircher') was one of the very best performers and my personal favorite. The dark, cherry red flowers were beautiful and bountiful from early summer to frost. It also had a dense, compact habit, whereas many other selections had comparable but looser habits. While autumn salvias didn't overwinter for us, seedlings sprouted each spring in our trial beds. They were not abundant, however.

UNCOMMON OPTIONS WORTH TRACKING DOWN



Red velvet salvia (*S. confertiflora*) was hands-down my favorite in the trial. It possesses a bodacious quality that was accentuated greatly by its vibrantly colored flowers. Lush corrugated leaves, dark red stems, and a vase-shape form gave it a handsome summer character. In dramatic fashion, bright red-orange flowers clasped in fuzzy, dark, red-orange calyces made their first appearance in early fall. The small flowers were crowded together on slender velvety red wands that jutted above the dark green foliage. Like all late bloomers, red velvet salvia has an eye-popping floral display that was at the whim of the capricious autumnal weather. Our best show was two fabulous months of flowering in 2017 before a killing frost hit on November 22. But no matter how long or short the bloom, I heartily recommend red velvet salvia to any and all adventurous gardeners.

Bolivian salvia (*S. oxyphora*) is just one of many exotic salvias in the trial that come from Central and South America. I was captivated by the architecture of the large green terminal flower buds before it bloomed but was not prepared for the hot pink spectacle that followed. Beginning in midsummer, über-fuzzy bright pink flowers popped out, blooming steadily to frost. I never lost my fascination for the flower structure and bloom pattern of this salvia. Glossy green leaves with a wrinkly texture were a handsome foil for the whimsical flowers. Bolivian salvia had a strong bushy habit, although the stems were a little brittle and occasionally damaged by wind. I can't say I ever noticed a hummingbird on Bolivian salvia, but it always had so many human visitors that I would've had trouble seeing one.



UNCOMMON OPTIONS WORTH TRACKING DOWN



Of all the salvias, I think **Andean silver salvia** (*S. discolor*) had the most charismatic flowers. Its deep purple-black blossoms peeking shyly out of pendulous silvery chartreuse calyces were both exquisite and curiously subtle at the same time. The downy calyx looked either more silver or more green depending on the quality of ambient light. The stems and undersides of the green leaves were bright white and sticky, with a sweet bubblegum scent. Its habit was bushy to loose and irregular, which was expected because it's actually a scandent, or weakly climbing perennial. I would grow this in a container that's perfectly placed for up-close viewing.



At nearly 60 inches, **'Limelight' Mexican bush salvia** (*S. mexicana* 'Limelight') was one of the tallest plants in the trial and will likely be larger in warmer places. Its glossy, heart-shaped leaves and imposing vase-shaped habit provided bold texture and lushness all summer. Generous spikes of long, dark, purple-blue flowers offset by bright chartreuse calyces were the crowning touch. While borne in profusion, the flowers didn't open for us until midfall, which matters a great deal if a frost comes early. In a warm autumn when frost was delayed, the flower show was phenomenal.



The fuzzy, bright, silvery white leaves of **Canary Island salvia** (*S. canariensis* var. *candidissima*) looked more like Jerusalem sage (*Phlomis fruticosa*, Zones 8–10) or lamb's ears (*Stachys byzantina*, Zones 4–8) than any of its neighboring salvias. Clusters of light lavender flowers held in purple calyces topped the argent plants from midsummer to frost. The densely bushy habit suffered at times from the heavy flowers weighing down the stems, looking fountainsque at best and open bowl-like at worst. Canary Island salvia's woolly character suggests its affinity to sunny, dry gardens. Try it with other heat-lovers in a container where water can be controlled.



The large, dark, orange-red flowers and fuzzy black-purple calyces of **'Painted Lady' eyelash salvia** (*S. blepharophylla* 'Painted Lady') were beyond sexy. The exotically colorful blooms were profuse from early summer to frost, but they stalled a bit during the hottest periods, indicating that some afternoon shade is ideal. Eyelash salvia's name comes from the tiny hairs that line the margins of the glossy leaves. 'Painted Lady' boasts reliable dark purple stems and purple-tinged leaves that varied in intensity throughout the summer. Our plants had neat mounded habits and never exhibited the rhizomatous nature 'Painted Lady' has in places where it is a perennial. The flamboyant flowers and glossy foliage make an uncommon and thoroughly satisfying combination.

**WEB
EXTRA**

To see a comparison chart of all 107 salvias, go to FineGardening.com/extras.

Richard Hawke is plant evaluation manager at the Chicago Botanic Garden in Glencoe, Illinois.

Tender salvias at a glance



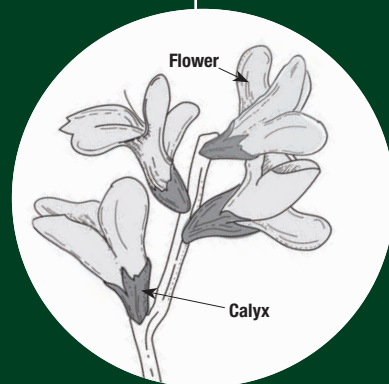
Salvias are generally undemanding, easy-care plants. However, they do have a series of unique traits that make them particularly noteworthy.

- ▶ **CONDITIONS:** They grow best in moist, well-drained soils, although some—such as pineapple salvia, Canary Island salvia, and West Texas grass salvia—are drought resistant. Partial to high shade is recommended in hot climates for autumn salvias, eyelash-leaved salvias, and Bolivian salvia, among others.
- ▶ **POLLINATORS:** Hummingbirds flitting around the salvias caused quite a stir with visitors and photographers alike. Near collisions were a daily and often comical happening. Although our observations were anecdotal, what looked to be the hummingbirds' slight preference for blue and purple flowers was intriguing. Bees and butterflies were more catholic in their tastes, exuberantly sampling all colors, including blue (pictured).
- ▶ **DISEASES/PESTS:** Although the salvias were trouble free, they can be affected by powdery mildew, rust, stem rot, fungal leaf spots, whiteflies, aphids, and spider mites. Most salvias are resistant to deer and rabbits because of their scented foliage.
- ▶ **DEADHEADING:** Removing spent blossoms promotes longer flowering and is often recommended, but we observed continuous bloom all summer even without pruning or fertilizing.
- ▶ **NATIVE RANGE/HARDINESS:** Many of the tender salvias come from south of the U.S.-Mexico border, so winter hardiness was not expected in cooler zones. The only salvias with one or more plants surviving our Chicago winter were 'La Trinidad Pink' (*S. microphylla* 'La Trinidad Pink', pictured), cedar salvia (*S. roemeriana*), and West Texas grass salvia.
- ▶ **FROST:** The salvias reacted differently to mild frost—some quickly turned black, while others wilted or dropped leaves yet continued to flower until a killing frost.
- ▶ **FLOWERING:** Starts in early summer and ends with frost. Salvias' floral displays pack more punch than those of their perennial and annual siblings because the two-lipped flowers are cupped in colorful, sometimes prominent calyces. The calyx (pictured) can be an analogous or a contrasting color to the flower, and it usually remains vibrant and persistent after the flowers have fallen away.
- ▶ **PROPAGATION:** This is done by taking tip cuttings and rooting (pictured) or by seeding.

Hardest variety



Calyx



TRIAL PARAMETERS



Between 2016 and 2018, the Chicago Botanic Garden evaluated 107 different tender salvias in comparative trials. The salvias were replanted each spring from cuttings taken from stock plants.

How long: 3 years

Zone: 5b

Conditions: Full sun; well-drained, alkaline, clay-loam soil

Care: We provided minimal care, allowing the plants to thrive or fail under natural conditions. Besides observing their ornamental traits, we monitored the plants to see how well they grew and adapted to environmental and soil conditions while we kept a close watch for any disease or pest problems. Plants were left in the ground over winter to determine cold hardiness, then removed in the spring if no sign of life was noted.

RESULTS KEY

OVERALL RATING

Excellent ★★★★★
 Good ★★★
 Fair ★★
 Poor ★

RATING	NAME	COLDEST ZONE	HEIGHT	WIDTH	FLOWER COLOR	FLOWER LENGTH	FLOWER COVERAGE
★★★★★	<i>S. 'Amistad'</i>	8	46 in.	64 in.	Purple; nearly black calyx	1¾ in.	Excellent
★★★★★	<i>S. 'Anthony Parker'</i>	8	50 in.	64 in.	Blue-purple; fuzzy dark purple calyx	1 in.	Excellent
★★★★★	<i>S. 'Balsalmisp' (Mystic Spires Blue)</i>	8	37 in.	41 in.	Blue-purple; violet calyx	¾ in.	Excellent
★★★★★	<i>S. 'Betsy's Choice'</i>	8	46 in.	42 in.	Shiny deep purple; black-purple calyx	1¾ in.	Good
★★★★★	<i>S. blepharophylla 'Painted Lady'</i>	7	25 in.	29 in.	Dark red-orange; fuzzy black-purple calyx	1¼ in.	Excellent
★★★★★	<i>S. canariensis</i> var. <i>candidissima</i>	9	28 in.	32 in.	Light lavender; purple calyx	¾ in.	Good
★★★★★	<i>S. coccinea 'Brenthurst'</i>	9	38 in.	38 in.	Light pink; pink lobe; purplish calyx	1¼ in.	Excellent
★★★★★	<i>S. confertiflora</i>	9	46 in.	33 in.	Red-orange; dark red-orange calyx	½ in.	Excellent
★★★★★	<i>S. discolor</i>	9	34 in.	30 in.	Black-purple; silvery chartreuse calyx	1½ in.	Excellent
★★★★★	<i>S. elegans 'Golden Delicious'</i>	9	44 in.	57 in.	Dark red; yellow-green calyx	1⅜ in.	Excellent
★★★★★	<i>S. 'Ember's Wish'</i>	9	38 in.	52 in.	Deep reddish pink; dark red-purple calyx	2 in.	Excellent
★★★★★	<i>S. 'Flamenco Rose'</i>	7	29 in.	25 in.	Vivid pink; red-purple calyx	1¼ in.	Excellent
★★★★★	<i>S. greggii 'Balmirbur' (Mirage™ Burgundy)</i>	6	29 in.	35 in.	Magenta-pink; black-purple calyx	1¼ in.	Excellent
★★★★★	<i>S. greggii 'Balmircemi' (Mirage™ Cream)</i>	6	22 in.	22 in.	Creamy white; dark purple calyx	7⁄8 in.	Excellent
★★★★★	<i>S. greggii 'Balmircher' (Mirage™ Cherry Red)</i>	6	20 in.	30 in.	Dark cherry red; dark purple calyx	1 in.	Excellent
★★★★★	<i>S. greggii 'Balmirhopi' (Mirage™ Hot Pink)</i>	6	25 in.	36 in.	Hot pink; green calyx with red-purple cast	1 in.	Excellent
★★★★★	<i>S. greggii 'Balmirpink' (Mirage™ Pink)</i>	6	21 in.	30 in.	Hot pink; green calyx with bronze cast	1 in.	Excellent
★★★★★	<i>S. greggii 'Balmirsofin' (Mirage™ Soft Pink)</i>	6	22 in.	34 in.	Dark pink; light pink lobe; reddish bronze calyx	1 in.	Excellent
★★★★★	<i>S. greggii 'Balmirvio' (Mirage™ Violet)</i>	6	19 in.	28 in.	Violet; very dark purple calyx	1 in.	Excellent
★★★★★	<i>S. greggii 'Balmirwhite' (Mirage™ White)</i>	6	20 in.	42 in.	Creamy white; pale green calyx	1½ in.	Excellent
★★★★★	<i>S. greggii 'Cherry Chief'</i>	6	37 in.	38 in.	Vivid reddish pink; dark purple calyx	1 in.	Excellent
★★★★★	<i>S. greggii 'Dark Dancer'</i>	6	33 in.	35 in.	Magenta-pink; lighter calyx	1⅜ in.	Excellent
★★★★★	<i>S. greggii 'Furman's Red'</i>	6	21 in.	24 in.	Dark red; dark purple calyx	1 in.	Excellent

★ ★ ★	<i>S. greggii</i> 'Grace Pink'	6	27 in.	33 in.	Hot pink; purple-pink calyx	1 in.	Excellent
★ ★ ★	<i>S. greggii</i> 'Radio Red'	6	24 in.	32 in.	Red; burgundy and green calyx	1 1/8 in.	Excellent
★ ★ ★	<i>S. greggii</i> 'Red Letter'	6	24 in.	28 in.	Dark red; dark burgundy calyx	1 in.	Excellent
★ ★ ★	<i>S. greggii</i> 'Stormy Pink'	6	31 in.	30 in.	Light red-purple and creamy white; green calyx	1 1/8 in.	Excellent
★ ★ ★	<i>S. greggii</i> 'Teresa'	6	27 in.	30 in.	White and lavender; green calyx with bronze cast	1 in.	Excellent
★ ★ ★	<i>S. greggii</i> 'Viva'	6	26 in.	40 in.	Dark magenta; burgundy calyx	3/4 in.	Excellent
★ ★ ★	<i>S. guaranitica</i> 'Black and Bloom'	8	41 in.	42 in.	Blue; black-purple calyx	2 in.	Excellent
★ ★ ★	<i>S. guaranitica</i> 'Black and Blue'	8	30 in.	34 in.	Blue; black-purple calyx	1 5/8 in.	Excellent
★ ★ ★	<i>S. guaranitica</i> 'Cosquin'	8	37 in.	40 in.	Blue; pale green calyx	2 in.	Excellent
★ ★ ★	<i>S. 'Indigo Spires'</i>	7	52 in.	81 in.	Blue-purple; violet calyx	3/4 in.	Excellent
★ ★ ★	<i>S. 'Lemon Light'</i>	7	21 in.	26 in.	Primrose yellow; yellow-green calyx	1 1/4 in.	Excellent
★ ★ ★	<i>S. leucantha</i> 'Santa Barbara'	9	35 in.	31 in.	Light purple; dark purple calyx	5/8 in.	Excellent
★ ★	<i>S. 'Love and Wishes'</i>	9	32 in.	48 in.	Magenta; purple calyx	2 in.	Excellent
★ ★ ★	<i>S. mexicana</i> 'LimeLight'	7	57 in.	54 in.	Dark blue-purple; bright chartreuse calyx	1 3/4 in.	Excellent
★ ★ ★	<i>S. microphylla</i> 'Forever Red'	7	31 in.	43 in.	Scarlet; purple and green calyx	1 1/8 in.	Excellent
★ ★ ★	<i>S. microphylla</i> 'Hoja Grande'	7	27 in.	36 in.	Vivid pink; green calyx with purple tips	1 1/8 in.	Excellent
★ ★ ★	<i>S. microphylla</i> 'Hot Lips'	7	31 in.	38 in.	White and red; pale green calyx	1 in.	Excellent
★ ★ ★	<i>S. microphylla</i> 'La Trinidad Pink'	7	28 in.	28 in.	Magenta-pink; green calyx with purple cast	1 1/4 in.	Excellent
★ ★ ★	<i>S. 'Novasalfuc'</i> (Arctic Blaze® Fuchsia)	6	21 in.	26 in.	Deep red-pink; green calyx with purple cast	1 in.	Excellent
★ ★ ★	<i>S. 'Novasalpur'</i> (Arctic Blaze® Purple)	6	24 in.	33 in.	Violet; dark purple calyx	1 in.	Excellent
★ ★ ★	<i>S. 'Novasalred'</i> (Arctic Blaze® Red)	6	23 in.	31 in.	Slightly red-orange; red-purple calyx	1 1/8 in.	Excellent
★ ★ ★	<i>S. oxyphora</i>	7	39 in.	33 in.	Hot pink; green calyces	1 1/2 in.	Good
★ ★ ★	<i>S. regla</i> 'Royal'	7	36 in.	36 in.	Deep peachy red; same calyx	1 3/8 in.	Good
★ ★ ★	<i>S. reptans</i> (West Texas form)	5	39 in.	39 in.	Blue; violet calyx	3/8 in.	Excellent
★ ★ ★	<i>S. sagittata</i>	8	47 in.	46 in.	Blue; green calyx with purplish cast	1 1/8 in.	Excellent
★ ★ ★	<i>S. splendens</i> 'Dancing Flames'	9	31 in.	31 in.	Dark orange; red-orange calyx	2 in.	Excellent
★ ★ ★	<i>S. splendens</i> 'Yvonne's'	9	30 in.	33 in.	Deep red-orange; same calyx	1 3/4 in.	Excellent
★ ★ ★	<i>S. 'Wendy's Wish'</i>	9	32 in.	45 in.	Dark magenta; smoky violet calyx	2 in.	Excellent
★ ★ ★	<i>S. × jamensis</i> 'Dyson's Orangy Pink'	7	26 in.	36 in.	Light pink-orange; green-bronze calyx	1 in.	Excellent
★ ★ ★	<i>S. × jamensis</i> 'Golden Girl'	7	19 in.	24 in.	Primrose yellow and orange-pink; green calyx	1 in.	Excellent
★ ★ ★	<i>S. × jamensis</i> 'Maraschino'	7	37 in.	43 in.	Red; burgundy calyx	1 in.	Excellent

SOURCES

- **Annie's Annuals & Perennials**, Richmond, CA; 888-266-4370; anniesannuals.com
- **Plant Delights Nursery**, Raleigh, NC; 919-772-4794; plantdelights.com
- **Flowers by the Sea**, Elk, CA; 707-877-1717; fbts.com
- **High Country Gardens**, Shelburne, VT; 800-925-9387; highcountrygardens.com