

Using Garden Sage Wisely

Garden sage (*Salvia officinalis*, common sage) and its cultivars are frequently grown in both herb gardens and among ornamentals. Few people, however, take full advantage of their garden sage. You're thinking that the next piece of advice will be that we should all slog through the mud Thanksgiving morning to harvest fresh sage for the turkey stuffing? No, let's see what we can do with sage right now.



◆ *Caution*

Taken in high doses, the compound thujone contained in garden sage may cause convulsions. Since thujone is volatile, most of it dissipates when sage is cooked, so the culinary use of sage is safe. Please consult a professional about the risks of using sage as an internal medicinal treatment.

Sage should be avoided or used with caution during pregnancy, as it is a uterine stimulant.

◆ *Sage Leaves – cosmetic and therapeutic uses*

To make a soothing mouthwash or gargle, pour one cup boiling water over three teaspoons finely chopped fresh sage leaves, steep the tea, strain, cool and use.

Rub sage leaves on teeth to whiten them.

Use one quarter cup each dried sage leaves and dried strawberry leaves or mugwort in herbal baths to relieve stiff muscles and aching joints. Hang the cheesecloth-wrapped bundle of herbs from the spout while running the bath water, let the bundle steep a while, and squeeze the bundle well before removing it and climbing in. Another approach is to make an infusion of sage and strawberry leaves (pour boiling water over a half-cup of dried herbs; let it steep 10 to 20 minutes; strain) and add it to your bath.

To enjoy an invigorating herbal bath, use dried sage leaves and cool water.

◆ *Sage Leaves – crafts*

Use dried sage leaves in wreaths, especially culinary ones.

◆ *Sage Leaves and Flowers – culinary*

Add sage flowers to salads.

If allowed to flower, some of the vigor of a plant goes into flower and seed production, so if your aim is to have good leaves for cooking, pinch off flower buds. Some gardeners believe that leaves harvested in the spring are more pungent than those harvested in autumn.

Add whole sage leaves, along with fresh or dried chiles, to a pot of beans.

Use four finely chopped fresh sage leaves per pound of meat in any pork dish involving a gravy or sauce.

Use culinary sage leaves' unique pungency to complement poultry, stuffings, and sausages. The flavor will intensify if the leaves are dried.

Perk up soft cheeses and lend an earthy tone to breads (especially flat breads like Italian foccacia) by adding a bit of dried crumbled sage or chopped fresh sage.

Fry individual sage leaves in olive oil for a few seconds, then crumble them over garlicky mashed potatoes. Visit the [Epicurious](#) website for eleven recipes involving fried sage leaves. From the home page, search for *fried sage leaves*.

Mix new potatoes, shallots, and slivers of sage; drizzle lightly with olive oil; roast in a moderate oven until golden brown.

Try the recipe for sage cornmeal muffins in Mary Preus' *The Northwest Herb Lover's Handbook*, or the one for feta corn muffins on the Epicurious website, or simply add a tablespoon of finely chopped fresh sage leaves to your own recipe for corn bread or cornmeal muffins. If you pursue Preus' book, try the sage butter, too.

Consult Sylvia Vaughn Thompson's November 1990 *Gourmet* article for enticing recipes such as "Sage Ricotta Pancakes", "Pear Sage Honey Fool", "Sauteed Turkey Cutlets with Sage, Ham, Tomatoes and Mozzarella" and more.

◆ *Sage Leaves – drying*

As with most herbs, gather leaves before flowers open. In warm, dry climates/seasons, spread leaves on a table or shelf between sheets of newspaper or muslin. Turn daily or lay leaves on a mesh screen raised to allow air circulation underneath. Avoid bright sunlight, which bleaches the color of the leaves; and cool conditions, which increase drying time and result in a lower-quality product. A week should suffice for drying the leaves. In cool and/or wet weather, use an airing cupboard, shaded greenhouse, warm attic, dry ventilated shed, domestic oven or dehydrator. The temperature should be no more than 90 degrees F for the first day or two; then it can be reduced to 75 degrees for another three to five days. Turn the material occasionally. Complete a full batch at a time because adding fresh material reduces temperature and raises humidity. If you are going to ultimately use bunches of herbs, tying them prior to drying will be easier than tying them afterward.

◆ *Sage Leaves – general household uses*

Use dried sage leaves among linens to discourage moths and other insects. Herbalists believe that sage leaves burnt on embers or boiled in water disinfect a room. Sage smoke is effective against kitchen or animal odors. Try

the recipe for homemade potpourri in *The Complete Book of Herbs* by Clevely and Richmond, cited at the end of this article, or create your own potpourri using sage as one of the ingredients.

◆ *Sage Plants Indoors*

Try taking cuttings of a variegated cultivar for indoor use during winter. Trim it frequently.

◆ *Sage Flowers and Leaves – infusions (tea)*

Many of the cultivars of *Salvia officinalis* do not bloom, but if you grow *Salvia officinalis* (common garden sage), you have a source of edible purplish-blue flowers which can be infused to make a tea which is described as “light” and “balsamic”. Collect flowers in summer and dry them using the method for drying leaves, under Sage Leaves – *drying*. Store the flowers in sealed containers once they are dry. To make an infusion, place a tablespoon of dried flowers per person in a teapot and fill with boiling water. Cover and steep five to eight minutes. When the flavor is strong enough, strain and serve.

To make a sage-leaf infusion, use a tablespoon of torn fresh leaves per cup. A pinch of sugar intensifies the flavor. Try the golden variegated sage to enhance the visual aspect of the experience.

◆ *Characteristics of Salvia officinalis*

An aromatic perennial herb of the *Lamiaceae* family, *S. officinalis* grows to a height of two feet. The leaves for which the shrub is cultivated are oval, rough or wrinkled, downy, and grey-to-whitish green.



Salvia officinalis 'Berggarten'

◆ *Cultivars of Salvia officinalis*

Salvia officinalis 'Albiflora' has white flowers.

S. o. 'Berggarten' ('Mountain Garden') is an eighteen-inch tall plant characterized by a dense growth habit. It is similar in appearance to common sage but has larger, broader leaves and fewer flowers, is said to have superior culinary qualities, and may be longer lived.

Two of the *Salvia officinalis* cultivars are called Golden Sage. The first, *Salvia officinalis* 'Aurea', has leaves on which gold, yellow and cream blend with green. (It is not to be confused with *Salvia aurea* (*S. Africana-lutea*), also called Golden Sage, an evergreen shrub which is top-growth hardy to only 20 degrees F but may resprout from the roots when it is exposed to colder temperatures.) *S. o.* 'Aurea' is a compact dense plant which is very showy among ornamentals. The other, *S. o.* 'Icterina' Gold Variegated Sage, zones 2-10, has grey-green leaves with yellow or gold margins and wide green veins. A low dense shrub, it is the hardiest of the garden sage cultivars; it does not bloom. When



Salvia officinalis 'Aurea'

either golden sage is substituted for garden sage in recipes, the flavor might be less strong. If golden sage is grown in well-limed soil, it has a slight citrus aroma. The golden foliage provides a welcome glow in the landscape or herb garden, and its slow growth habit is appreciated by gardeners seeking low-maintenance plants.

S. o. 'Holt's Mammoth', which grows to three feet, has four- to five-inch long leaves and grows quickly, so it is popular with commercial growers who have to cut and dry large quantities of leaves.

S. o. 'Nana', ('Compacta', 'Minimus') Dwarf Sage, zones 4-10, is recommended for containers, as it stays at least half the size of the species. It tastes and smells like garden sage, but does not grow as fast or demand as much care. Its leaves are narrower and set closer together than those of garden sage. If you plant sage in a container, be sure that the potting soil is fast-draining and that the companion plants have similar drought-tolerance.

S. o. 'Purpurascens', Purple (or Red) Sage, zones 8-10, has new leaves flushed purplish-red, which then slowly mature to gray-green. It has purple leafstalks and stems.

S. o. 'Purpurascens Variegata' is like purple sage but the leaves are marked with large areas of pink and creamy white.

S. o. 'Tricolor', Variegated Sage, has gray-green leaves with irregular white margins that appear pink on new growth. It is a very decorative plant, but its hardiness is questioned by some gardeners.

◆ In the garden

Salvia officinalis and its blooming cultivars are good honeybee and butterfly herbs.



Salvia officinalis 'Purpurascens'

One way of dealing with the tendency of Red and Variegated Sages to become lanky and weak is to grow them in dry, chalky soil. Such a medium can be prepared by first combining sand with either oyster shells or dolomite chips. Then mix equal amounts of soil and the sand mixture.

An alternative is to force the plant to bush by frequent pruning. Avoid cutting into bare wood, which usually causes dieback. Refrain from pruning until there is no threat of frost, as new growth is prone to frostbite. When new leaves begin to unfurl in spring, cut just above fresh growth. During the growing season, once or twice tip-pinch shoots or cut stems back by no more than one-third. When the plant becomes woody, with patches of bare stems, it is time to replace it. If you have a mound of shrubby growth, with bare lower stems, you can propagate new plants by the technique known as mounding or stooling. Late spring or early summer cuttings, rooted in a moistened mixture of vermiculite and peat take about 45 days, and can be transplanted to the garden about the same time as tomatoes or peppers.

Red sage looks spectacular on a carpet of pale golden marjoram, but remember that the leaves of the sage lose some of their redness as the season wears on, and that evening twilight makes reds recede almost to the point of invisibility.

◆ Sage Pests

Sage plants don't seem to be bothered by garden pests, but slugs like to take shelter under some sage plants – either on the ground or on the underside of low-growing branches.

Resources

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