Mention the genus *Salvia* to a gardener and chances are you’ll get one of two very distinct reactions.

On one side, there’s the non-plussed, verging on “meh.” On the other? The unbridled enthusiasm of a passionate devotee.

*Salvia* is native to both the Eastern Hemisphere and the Americas. With more than 900 species, more than half of which are found in the Americas, *Salvia* is the largest member of the mint family (*Lamiaceae*).

The word “salvia” derives from the Latin *salvus*, meaning “safe,” which speaks to the value historically placed on the plants’ medicinal and culinary attributes. Sage is the common name and can refer to any plant in the genus, but is typically used in reference to *Salvia officinalis*, or culinary sage.

*Salvia* is a diverse genus. You’ll find these plants growing as annuals, perennials and biennials, as well as evergreen and deciduous shrubs. Admirers will tell you the fragrance and flowers of *Salvia* contribute considerably to the garden.

In the words of Bill “The Salvia Guy” Fletcher, of Cornelius, Oregon, “They’re as tough as weeds, but a lot more interesting.”

**Flower power**

Tubular or bell-shaped flowers are usually produced on spiky racemes, which extend above the foliage. These graceful flowers are extremely attractive to pollinators, butterflies and hummingbirds. The blooms typically range in color from blue to purple, red and pink; white and yellow occur less frequently.

Molly Stiles, designer with Annie Bam Landscape Solutions, says *Salvia* can’t be beat for attracting wildlife to the garden. What’s more, they provide late summer interest at a time when other perennials are bloomed out. “As long as they’re deadheaded throughout the season, they’ll keep on blooming,” she said.

*Salvia officinalis* is the culinary sage familiar to most cooks. It also has excellent ornamental qualities, and is attractive to bees and butterflies.

PHOTO COURTESY OF J.C. RAULSTON ARBORETUM AT NC STATE UNIVERSITY
Many salvias make great cut flow- ers, according to Stiles, and *S. farinacea* ‘Victoria Blue’ is also an excellent candidate for drying.

In Fletcher's personal garden, hummingbirds seem to locate *Salvia* flowers based on stored GPS coordinates. “They will return to the exact spot in the garden where things were blooming last year,” he reported.

Maurice Horn, co-owner of Joy Creek Nursery in Scappoose, Oregon, declared *Salvia* to have one of the longest bloom times in his display garden. “They get started in June and are frequently going into November, up until the first frost of the season,” he said.

The nose knows

In his forward to *The New Book of Salvias: Sages for Every Garden* by Betsy Clebsch, Don Mahoney, curator at the San Francisco Botanical Garden, wrote: “I was first drawn to salvias because of the exquisite scent of the leaves of California’s native coastal species ….

Strong herbal fragrances are usually an element of native habitats, and salvias are essential garden ingredients if you wish to recapture the complete sensory experience of natural settings.”

Clebsch wrote that the natural oils found in the leaves are not only responsible for their wonderful scent, but may also provide some protection against insect predation.

Tiny glandular hairs grow along the leaves and stems of some *Salvia* species. These hairs help to reduce water loss and can release oils, which give the plant its distinctive aroma. Hand (or hoof) contact ruptures the cells and releases the volatile oil, making the plant unattractive for snacking — and thus deer resistant.

Fletcher said it’s not just animals and insects that can be turned away by the odor. *S. sclarea*, or clary sage, can take on the aroma of a sweaty human once the weather turns hot, whereas the scent of *S. nemorosa* sometimes resembles that of cat urine. Thankfully, most salvias have a much more pleasurable scent.

Siting Salvia

While not a hard-and-fast rule, it is safe to say that salvias, particularly perennial varieties, appreciate well-drained soils, especially during cool and wet winter months. Heavy, soggy soil tends to result in root rot and a quick death. Full to at least partial sun is generally required and nearly all are heat and drought tolerant.

Pests are not generally an issue, although slugs can be a problem in the early spring; bait accordingly.

Salvias are equally at home planted in the ground or in containers. Stiles said they are common in commercial landscapes for good reason: they’re tough and able to withstand abuse. A broken irrigation system does not mean certain death.

Fletcher maintains a collection of non-hardy *Salvia*, which he plants in the garden during spring, then digs out and over-winters in a greenhouse. Of course, hardy perennial salvias are fine left in the garden year round.

Both Stiles and Fletcher spoke highly of the container potential of most *Salvia*. As long as plants are kept watered, they can stay happily root bound for a long while. “And once you do place them in the ground,” Fletcher added, “they’ll take off with amazing growth.”

Stiles recommended one sure-fire container combination: *S. microphylla* ‘Hot Lips’ with *S. farinacea* ‘Victoria Blue’. The red, white and blue blooms are a Fourth of July favorite with Annie Barn’s clients.

*Salvia* also does well planted in containers along with Mediterranean herbs, since their cultural requirements are similar, and they add a nice height when planted with low-growing sedum.

Selling Salvia

Why isn’t the public demanding more *Salvia* options at the nursery level? “Sadly, people seem to have forgotten about them,” said Horn.
Others said it comes down to education. As Greg Brice, sales manager at Broadmead Nursery in Amity, Oregon, explained it, “Salvias don’t really come into their own until late spring/early summer.” If they are not blooming in spring when the average gardener shops for new plant purchases, chances are they will be overlooked.

When he was actively growing and selling *Salvia*, Fletcher recalled many conversations in which he struggled to convince (sometimes successfully) a skeptical shopper of the eventual size and impact of the small, 4-inch plant in front of her. He knew the tiny *Salvia* would eventually exceed anything produced by a typical bedding annual, and the customer would be thrilled by the purchase.

Once the customer understood the explosive growth and blooming potential of the plant, Fletcher was on his way to creating a passionate devotee.

Stiles pointed to a lack of basic customer knowledge. “Some lack an understanding of what it means for a plant to be an annual versus a perennial,” she said.

Some customers buy an annual
Salvia thinking it will last forever. When it doesn’t, they assume salvias are difficult to care for and shy away from purchasing them in the future.

Fletcher agreed that there is an overall perception of Salvia as annuals. Non-hardy salvias from Mexico or South America do die out, but many customers don’t realize that plants originating in Asia and the Mediterranean are perfectly hardy in most of the United States.

Better signage, labeling and point-of-purchase education are keys to helping customers learn about the wide world of Salvia.

Salvias worth having

Ben Verhoeven, president and general manager at Peoria Gardens in Albany, Oregon, cited *S. nemorosa* ‘Caradonna’ as a favorite. The hardy (USDA Zone 4) perennial has deep violet-blue flowers on dark purple stems and richly colored foliage, growing to approximately 2 feet wide.

Other offerings at Peoria include the annuals *S. coccinea*, with trumpet-shaped blooms on tall spikes that make great cut flowers; *S. farinacea* ‘Victoria’ (royal blue flowers); and *S. splendens* ‘Lighthouse Red’ and the Salsa™ Series.

*S. microphylla* ‘Hot Lips’ is a woody Mexican sage with bicolored (white with red splotches) flowers. However, in the heat of summer, blooms are sometimes completely white or red. Once the temperatures cool, their vibrant two-tone color returns.

A Texas native, *S. greggii* ‘Flame’ features bright red flowers on dark stems. Hardy to USDA Zone 7, the evergreen broadleaf shrub is medium growing and rounded, with an eventual height and width of 3–4 feet.

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A tender perennial, *S. guaranitica* ‘Black and Blue’ offers the standout combination of cobalt blue flowers with a purple-black calyx.

Broadmead’s Brice identified his standout salvia as *S. × superba* ‘May Night’, an Old World sage with low foliage and tall indigo blue flower spikes.

Of course, it’s always interesting to ask the aficionados what they think should be more widely offered.

Fletcher, “The Salvia Guy,” mentioned *S. regla*, *S. mexicana* ‘Limelight’ and *S. confertiflora*. While ‘Limelight’ and *S. confertiflora* are generally treated as tender perennials, he recommended *S. regla* as the best plant for Pacific Northwest gardens.

A woody sage native to Mexico and Texas, *S. regla* features 2.5-inch scarlet flowers on woody stems growing to 6 feet or more, and it’s hardy to USDA Zone 8.

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