

In support of salvias

Steve Hickman

Many hardy-plant enthusiasts too easily dismiss salvias as being tender, or at least needing too much effort to over-winter. Either that or they have a vision of gaudy summer bedding. In both cases, salvias are not considered worth including with plantings of hardy perennials. However, though it's true many species from this huge family of plants are tender, those that can be grown with just a small amount of attention introduce some spectacular and unusual colours to the gardener's palette.

My brief and unscientific selection comes from a very diverse plant family. I won't mention many well-known species such as the *greggii* and *x jamensis* types, each with their own merits. My observations of hardiness are based on the plants growing in my own garden in the Midlands, on the Staffordshire/Derbyshire border. The winter of 2009/10 proved a hard trial for many plants, bringing disappointment and surprise survivals in about equal measure. We shall have to see what this last winter has done!

At the robust end of the hardiness spectrum are *Salvia transsylvanica*, *S. forsskaolii* (contents page) and *S. dolichantha*. All have large, silvery-green leaves, tall stems, and lipped, blue to mauve flowers. *S. forsskaolii* associates well with tall grasses such as *Anemanthele lessoniana* (syn. *Stipa arundinacea*), and has been much used in Piet Oudolf's prairie-style planting. I'd also include in this group *S. uliginosa*, the Bog Sage (fig. 1), which offers flowers in the range of blue-white to sky blue. All these species survived the hard winter with no protection and no ill effects.

The next group, which can be regarded as acceptably hardy given the right position in the garden,



Fig. 1 *S. uliginosa*, the Bog Sage



Fig. 2 *S. pratensis* 'Eveline'

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Fig. 3 *S. patens* 'Guanajuato'Fig. 4 *S. involucrata* 'Boutin'Fig. 5 *S. curviflora*

includes *S. pratensis*, *S. nemorosa* and *S. microphylla* cultivars (fig. 2). Planted in well-drained soil that never becomes waterlogged, and with some shelter from interplanted shrubs and hedges, they survived the severe conditions with some damage and a slow start in the spring, but with surprisingly few total losses. *Pratensis* and *nemorosa* provide hues of violet, blue, mauve, pink and white. The microphyllas provide the fireworks, with bright reds, purples, lilacs and pinks, and the somewhat acquired taste of 'Hot Lips' in red and white.

Lower down the hardiness scale come the *S. patens* cultivars, which require some cossetting. But in my opinion the range of colours that becomes available makes the effort worthwhile. In a reasonably mild winter, some cultivars will survive outside. *S. patens* 'Cambridge Blue', given a good mulch of coarse compost or bark, will come through in much the same way as dahlias might. Unfortunately, the most beautiful of all the *Salvia patens* group, 'Guanajuato' (fig. 3), will not; as a minimum it requires protection under fleece in an unheated greenhouse. Slightly more hardy is *S.* 'Indigo Spires', which has almost iridescent indigo-blue flowers. It will, surprisingly, survive the first few light frosts in the border but will not live through a winter outdoors.

Finally, at the definitely tender end of the family is a bewildering number of plants with stunning and often exotic blooms. A couple worth the effort are *S. involucrata* 'Boutin' (fig. 4) and *S. curviflora* (fig. 5). 'Boutin', a large upright plant with long cerise-pink flowers, will demand attention in any border. It stands extremely well with a group of pink and mauve *Phlox paniculata*. *S. curviflora* is a very refined, upright plant with delicate magenta flowers, growing to 1m in the open garden. It consistently attracts attention from gardening

friends who see it in flower. Fortunately, both are easy to propagate from seed sown in March with a little bottom heat or on a warm windowsill.

Were I to recommend a group that might otherwise be overlooked, it would be cultivars of *S. microphylla*, called ‘the blackcurrant sage’ because of the unmistakable scent when its leaves are crushed. In my experience the microphyllas have proved tougher than expected. This species can be grown from seed, or from cuttings, when it will develop into a small twiggy shrub up to 50cm in height over the course of a summer. The summer weather, and thus how well the woody stems ripen, determines how well the plant will stand up to the cold. A good well-drained soil is also essential – cold wet clay just will not do. By the end of summer the plant can look somewhat leggy, but any thoughts of trimming or tidying up should be put on hold until spring. The foliage will act as frost protection for some weeks, and in addition I provide a good 7–10cm mulch around the base of the plant in November.

Salvias are versatile little plants providing non-stop colour from July to October. I would suggest *S. ‘Royal Bumble’* (fig. 6) for a shot of vermillion red that glows in the border, particularly effective with dark-leaved heucheras. For a purple/mauve, try *S. microphylla ‘Wild Watermelon’* (fig. 7). I also grow *x jamensis ‘Trenance’*, with beautiful pale mauve flowers; it seems more vigorous than the previous two, and reaches up to 1m in height.

I hope I can persuade more Hardy Planters to try salvias. In my experience they needn’t be tender prima donnas. With a little care in their selection and positioning, a satisfying number of species and their cultivars can be regarded as truly hardy plants. 🐝



Fig. 6 *S. ‘Royal Bumble’*



Fig. 7 *S. microphylla ‘Wild Watermelon’*

Steve Hickman’s ¼-acre good-to-heavy loam lies above the Trent Valley, surrounded by large open fields with mature native hedges for wind protection. A member of the Society for many years, he has recently started to grow rare garden plants as part of the Conservation Scheme.