

Pruning Young Sages

I was all set to write about stink bugs. We seem to have an overabundance of these non-native, nuisance pests. So I got online and found out that they are really bad back east. I saw an entertaining [video](#) on how to remove them from your house using a vacuum cleaner and the freezer. But alas, I could not find a single one in my house or garden to photograph. Where are these lovely stinky things when you want them? So that goes into the to-do box and I will write on a more useful topic: Pruning young wild sages.

Whenever I give talks on caring for new native gardens, this is a topic people want to learn about. There are several wild sages that scent our sage scrub and chaparral wild lands, and make good additions to home gardens. These include black sage (*Salvia mellifera*), purple sage (*S. leucophylla*), white sage (*S. apiana*), and Cleveland sage (*S. clevelandii*).



From left to right: hummingbird sage, white sage, black sage, purple sage, Cleveland sage

By mixing these together a whole slew of cultivars come out with names like: Pozo Blue, Allen

Chickering, Aromas, Celestial Blue, and Whirly Blue.

In fact, there are many more sages native to California and nearby Baja California: Munz's sage (*Salvia munzii*), Cedros Island sage (*S. cedrosensis*), and Brandegeei's sage (*S. brandegeei*), to name a few. There are even desert sages, though these are difficult to grow in home gardens. And

there are a few annual sages like chia (*S. columbariae*) and thistle sage (*S. carduacea*).

Some of the cultivars, such as Bee's Bliss and Mrs. Beard, are groundcovers; others like Vicki Romo and Desperado have some genes from the pungent white sage; and even one sage, hummingbird sage (*S. spathacea*), spreads by rhizomes and can grow in shade. Betsy Clebsch's, [The New Book of Salvias](#), provides a comprehensive treatment of native and non-native garden sages.

For the purposes of this blog post I am going to focus on pruning white sage (*Salvia apiana*) and a selection of Cleveland sage called Winnifred Gilman. (This lovely plant is named after a woman whose first name was spelled with two n's, though it is often misspelled in the trade.) Pruning for these plants is similar to that appropriate for many of the Clevelandii cultivars mentioned above (Allen Chickering, Pozo Blue, etc.)



Winnifred Gilman Cleveland sage planted
in the parkway on January 12, 2011.

The recommendation (taken from [Care and Maintenance of Southern California Native Plant Gardens](#) by O'Brien, Landis and Mackey, p. 118-121) for these sages is to cut back young plants by about 1/3 to 1/2 in late summer to fall or winter, after flowering and before new growth begins. These sages do not sprout reliably from woody stems so it is best to control them when they are young and don't have long, brittle woody stems that are subject to breakage. Check for branches that look like they may split apart and cut them before calamity hits.



Winnifred grew and bloomed
right away, Nov. 18, 2011.

The following pictures show Winnifred from planting in January 2011 to the present. She received almost no supplemental summer water from the start. This summer Winnie was allowed to stay dry until July before receiving a good soaking. She was then groomed with a light pruning and removal of seedheads.



Winnifred in July 2012, having survived with no supplemental water to this time. I watered her and she greened up right away. I have been told Cleveland sage is not as tolerant of summer water as some of the other cultivars but so far, so good.



August 1, 2012, after a soaking (See [Summer Hydration](#)).

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August 3, 2012 following a bit of snipping. The seedheads and many of the live stems were pruned back.

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White sage growing in full sun - as preferred - maintains a dense, tight form. Only the flowering stalks need pruning, if desired. Leave some seedheads for the birds!

Although it is stated in [Care and Maintenance](#) that white sage does not need any pruning except the removal of old flower stalks, my white sage grows in a spot that gets full sun in summer but shade in winter when the sun is blocked by the house. The sage is doing fine but it is a bit leggy, so I prune it to encourage a denser, tighter form.

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White sage before pruning and after. It is hard to see how much I removed but it was a considerable amount.

(The last picture shows the pile of trimmings.)

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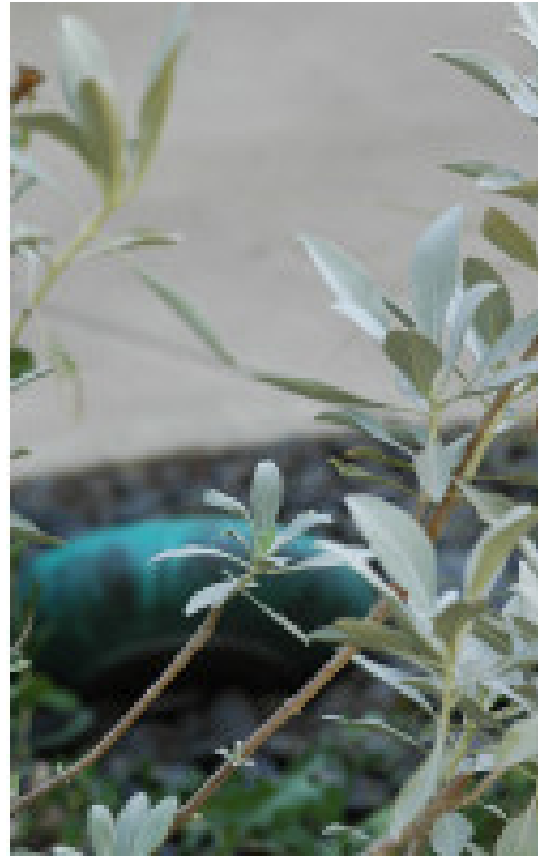
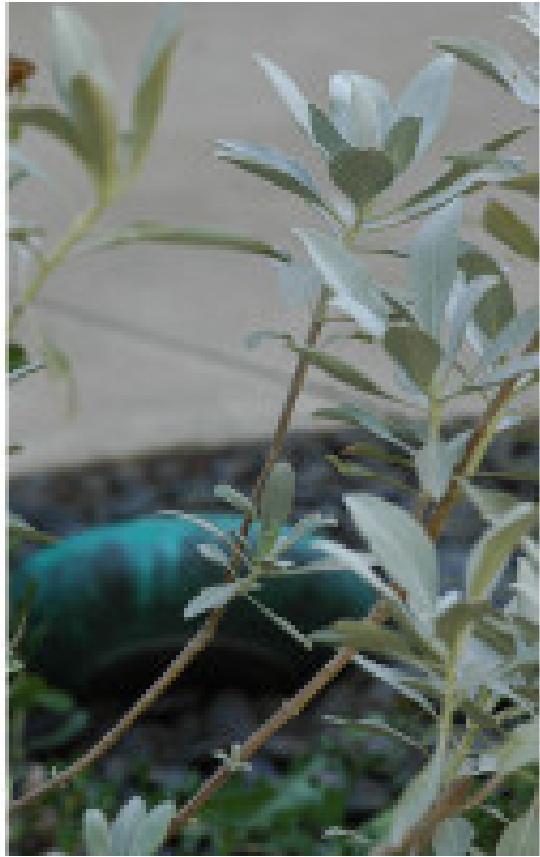


Inner hard woody stems have lot of buds. The amount and location of sprouting on stems determines the cuts that I make. I trim back stems that show growth below them. Stems with no growth on the woody portion are either removed entirely or if that is not possible, I pinch the terminal bud to encourage lower growth.

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Notice that cuts are made to the lower leaves or leaf buds.

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The large woody stem bending to the left is in danger of splitting from the main upright stem.
Cutting it can
prevent major damage to the sage.

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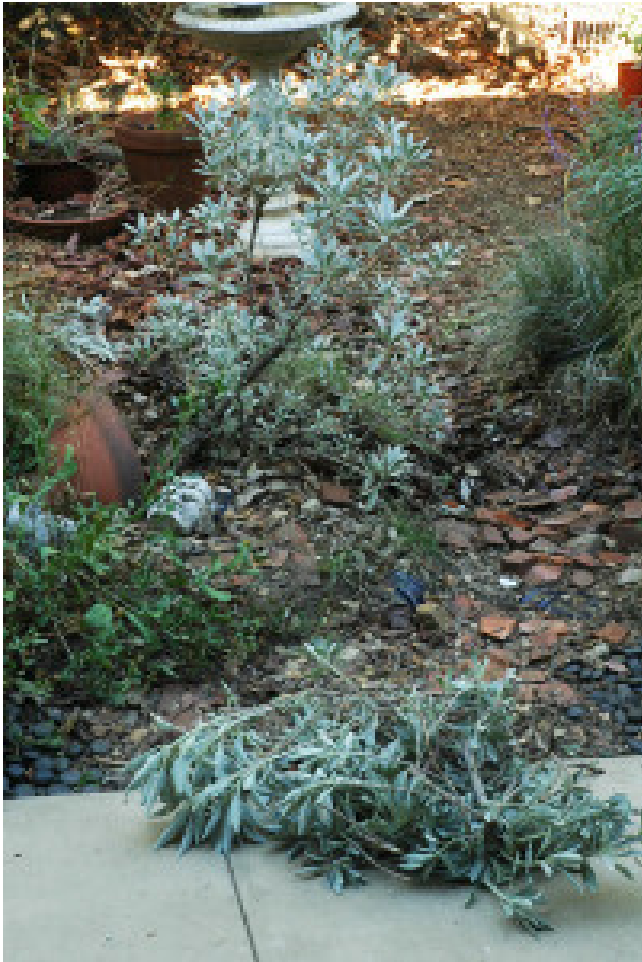
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Branch has been removed.

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Clippings in front of pruned white sage.