

## Taking the mystery out of sage

The [Native Sage Festival](#) is being held tomorrow, March 28, 2015, at [Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden](#). I will be giving two short talk-walks (10:30 am and 1 pm) on the horticultural use of native sages. There are so many native sages, including a myriad of cultivars, that one is quickly overwhelmed. However, many of these cultivars are very similar and can be lumped together. To begin to tease apart all the different types of native sage, let's consider several species that are local to our region: hummingbird sage (*Salvia spathacea*), white sage (*S. apiana*), black sage (*S. mellifera*), purple sage (*S. leucophylla*), and Cleveland sage (*Salvia clevelandii*). The following picture shows each of their leaves.

Hummingbird sage is the most distinctive of these wild sages. It grows in sun or part shade, has large green leaves with a fruity smell, and it spreads, rooting along its stems, to form a ground cover. As the name suggests, hummers love this plant.

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White sage has a very different look and smell. People either love its aroma or don't. You will surely remember this plant if you rub a leaf and smell it.

Although black sage is very common in our coastal sage scrub, it is not a great garden specimen. It can get very large and has a somewhat unappealing dormancy. We have planted lots of it in the [South Pasadena nature park](#) and the bees are most appreciative.

Purple sage has light leaves and the flower is often pinkish. There are a few low-growing selections of this plant that are used as mounding ground covers in the garden.

Cleveland sage has the most delicious aroma. I planted several on my parkway and have had many comments by pedestrians on how lovely it smells to walk along these plants. Once this plant is established it never gets watered.

There are about a billion (or maybe a handful) of cultivars that are probably crosses between purple and Cleveland sage. These include Aromas, Pozo Blue, Whirly Blue, and the ever-popular Allen Chickering. I've grown several of these and seen lots at Rancho, but there is no way I can tell them apart. These are fast growing plants that benefit from pruning while young. Older plants can be lightly pruned as well.

Finally - and I am by no means covering everything that there is to be had in the *Salvia* genus! - there are several hybrids that include creeping sage, *Salvia sonomensis*. Bee's Bliss and Mrs. Beard are two examples of low-growing, spreading sages that make excellent ground covers in the garden.

Other than hummingbird sage, these sages prefer full sun and very little or no summer water. They often are not at their loveliest in late summer to fall, but with careful selection, you can have sages blooming in your garden from February through June. Their spicy scent, interesting flowers, and habitat-value make them an excellent addition to the native garden.