

Sage

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Sage is an herb that is closely associated with poultry dishes, but it is much more versatile. It is also one of the easiest perennial herbs to grow.

Culinary sage refers to a small group of the genus *Salvia*. These are evergreen perennial subshrubs with woolly, grayish leaves that add a musky, earthy freshness to foods. Spikes of purple/blue flowers appear in mid-summer.

Botanical Name
Salvia officinalis

Common Names

Common Sage, Garden Sage

Hardiness Zones

Sage plants will be perennial in USDA Hardiness Zones 5 through 9. Common sage tends to be a bit hardier than the more ornamental varieties such as golden, purple and tricolor sage.

Sun Exposure

For healthy plants, give your sage plants full sun. In hot zones, USDA 8 or higher, they can handle some afternoon shade, but they need some sun or a breeze to dry the dampness off the leaves and prevent rotting.

Mature Size

Most culinary sage varieties grow about one- to two-feet tall by two- to three-feet wide, especially when in flower. You will probably be snipping and harvesting, which will limit their size and cause the plants to sprawl rather than grow tall.

Bloom Period

Sage plants bloom in mid-summer. They may bloom their first year, depending on size and site, but you are really growing the plants for the leaves.

Allow the plants to grow unharvested for the first year, so the plants can become established. After that, you can harvest leaves at any time, although they are considered at their best before or just after blooming. You can even brush snow aside and harvest in the winter.

Design

Sage quickly becomes a small woody shrub that can need replacing every three to four years. Frequent harvesting and pruning help to reinvigorate sage plants. While a sage plant is in its prime, it makes an attractive addition to both herb gardens and ornamental borders. The purple, golden, and tricolor varieties work especially well as edging plants, for borders or paths.

Using and Cooking

Tender new sage leaves are more flavorful than older leaves on woody stems, so don't be afraid to harvest. Sage leaves are a popular poultry and meat seasoning. They can be used both fresh and dried, even fried. Sage also makes a nice tea.

Sage stores well as a dried herb. The flavor is more intense if you dry the whole leaves and crumble them as needed.

Besides seasoning, sage leaves and branches are often featured in crafts such as wreaths, where they add color, texture, and scent.

Growing Tips

Sage plants can be started from seed, root cuttings, or transplants. Sage seed needs to be sown while fresh. The seed does not store well and even fresh, it is not terribly reliable and is slow to germinate.

Root cuttings can be propagated by layering. In fact, branches that touch the ground will often set down roots on their own. If this happens, you can separate the rooted section from the original plant and transplant it.

Fortunately, reasonably priced, small sage plants can be found in most garden centers in the spring. This is the easiest method to get an established plant quickly.

Sage prefers a warm, sunny location, although it does not enjoy extreme heat. It is not particular about soil, except that it be well-drained.

Care and Maintenance

Pruning after flowering will keep plants attractive and prevent them from getting too woody and leggy.

Sage is very drought tolerant and does not like sitting in wet soil. The leaves will get mildew if they are allowed to sit damp, so water infrequently.

The essential oils of herbs are strongest when they are grown in a lean soil. Go easy on the fertilizer. It's better to simply side dress with organic matter in the spring.

Sage is very happy growing in containers. If you want to try growing sage indoors, you will need to provide strong, direct light.

Pests and Problems

Few pests bother sage. It is more frequently killed by excess water, not enough light, or lack of pruning, than by insects or disease.

Suggested Varieties

Common *Salvia officinalis* is excellent for use as a seasoning and is undemanding in the garden. For variety and attractiveness, try one of the following.

- **Tricolor:** This plant doesn't get as large as *S. officinalis*, but the variegation of its green, white, and pink/purple leaves make it as much an ornamental as a culinary herb.
- **Purple (s. *purpurescens*):** This one has deep purple young leaves that mature to a burgundy.
- **Aurea:** This is a compact grower with soft yellow leaves and purple flowers.