

The Weekly Plant

13 March 2016

Common names: autumn sage, cherry sage, red Texas sage (or Texas red sage)

Scientific name: *Salvia greggii*¹

In our Community: in the courtyard between ASA and Community Center

Discussion

Arizona has Texas to thank for some of its most popular landscape plants. These Chihuahuan Desert natives (Texas ranger is another) seem to thrive in our Sonoran Desert environment.

Autumn sage is found naturally only in Texas and adjacent Mexico. It is an evergreen shrub with dark leaves and exceptionally showy flowers, usually red or dark pink, that attract hummingbirds. In warm climates it blooms in spring and then again in fall, with sporadic flowering in between.



In cold climates, where autumn sage can survive temperatures as low as 0°F, it dies to the ground in winter. New basal growth occurs in spring and flowering begins in summer or fall (perhaps the origin of the name “autumn” sage that seems so wrong to us).

As with any popular landscape plant, many varieties are available at nurseries, varying in size and flower color.² There are also hybrids (particularly with *Salvia microphylla*, cherry sage) that add to the diversity. If you want to add these plants to your landscape, make the selection when the plant is in flower so you know exactly what color you are getting. Check the tag for mature size. Autumn sage can grow to 3-4 feet but some selections are smaller or have a more spreading form.

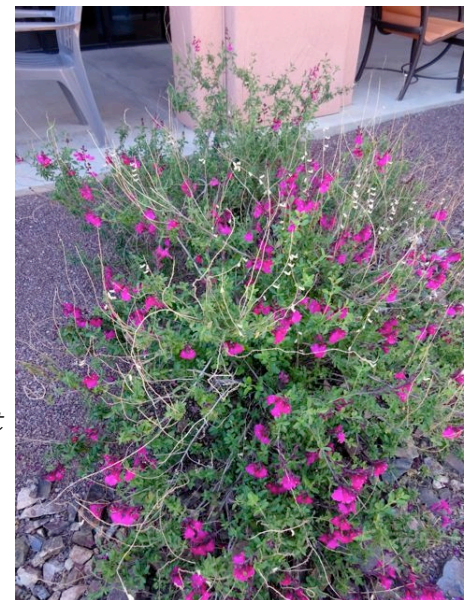


While autumn sage can add a splash of color to your garden, do think about the maintenance it needs. The flowers are held on a 6-8” stalk. The plant will look better and flower longer if those stalks are removed at their base when all the flowers on the stalk have faded (a technique called deadheading, see photo to right). Rather than grooming the plants every few days, you may decide to wait until flowering has slowed and cut everything back at once. This is fine, but be prepared for bare, unattractive stalks in among your flowers (as an example, see the plants in the Community Center patio). Most resources agree that autumn sage should be cut back in late winter (which in Tucson could be as early as late January), just enough to shape if the plant looks

good, more severely if plant has large woody stems and flowering has been poor. Later pruning delays the appearance of the first flowers.

¹ [Tropicos](#) is the source of the commonly accepted scientific name.

² You can see some of the different colors of flowers by [clicking here](#).



Above, left: the flowers of autumn sage have a large two-lobed lower lip. The calyx, which forms the outside of the flower bud and encloses the base of the petals, is often colored and adds to the ornamental value of the flower. Eventually the petals drop off. The calyx, dry and tan, can remain on the plant for several months (see photo to right also).

Right, top: to deadhead, cut at the yellow arrow once all the flowers fade. Right, bottom: last autumn’s flower stalks detract from the appearance of this plant.