About this genus

Florida gardeners will generally find three native Salvia species available. Scarlet or Tropical Sage (Salvia coccinea) is the most commonly available and occurs throughout the state (with the exception of the Keys) in areas with moist, well-drained soils. Lyreleaf Sage (Salvia lyrata) occurs throughout Florida south to Broward and Lee counties in moist soils at woodland edges or in open areas. Creeping or Southern River Sage (Salvia misella) occurs in moist semi-shaded woodlands from Alachua County south through Miami-Dade and Monroe counties. All of these Salvias are reliable nectar sources for butterflies.

Description

Scarlet Sage is a short-lived perennial that persists in the landscape by self-seeding. It generally reaches 18 to 36 inches in height and is taller than it is wide. Blooming occurs throughout the year in South Florida, and summer through fall in Central and North Florida. The abundant blooms are 1-inch long and usually deep coral or fire-engine red, although pink and white forms occur as well. The plant has square stems, which range in color from green to dark brown.

Lyreleaf Sage is a perennial that, for much of the year, consists of relatively flat, variegated leaves that display a range of green, dark-violet and chocolate-brown colors. Light violet-colored flowers appear on deep-green or burgundy-colored stems in late winter or early spring. Stems reach 12 to 24 inches high or taller, depending on available moisture, nutrients and light.

Creeping Sage is a low-growing evergreen groundcover 6 to 8 inches high. Blooming occurs off and on throughout the year, with tiny but abundant blue flowers. The blooms are not noticeable from a distance, but the light-green foliage is very attractive. Plants creep out from a main central stem.

Salvia is the largest genus in the mint family and has a long history of medicinal uses. Crush the foliage, and you’ll detect a faint herbal fragrance.

The State Wildflower license plate supports Florida native wildflower planting, education and research. Get the plate and help fill our state with wildflowers!
Planting

Some growers have successfully established Lyreleaf sage as a spreading groundcover after two or three years of cultivation in a landscape. Creeping Sage is a good choice for tight areas and under trees, where it can be planted in pockets between roots. It tolerates light foot traffic.

Seeds

Scarlet and Lyreleaf sage seeds are commercially available. To collect your own, allow flowers to dry on stems and gently shake them into a container to or remove flowers and obtain seed.

Plants

Plants are available in 4-inch to 1-gallon containers. Use Scarlet Sage in the mid-portion of a mixed wildflower bed or as an accent by itself.

Space Scarlet Sage plants 1 to 2 feet apart and resist the urge to plant in masses — they self-seed readily and will spread throughout the garden. Plant Lyreleaf Sage in small clusters, with individual plants about a foot apart. Space Creeping Sage plants 6 to 8 inches apart.

Care

For continuous blooming, cut Scarlet Sage plants back after flowers are spent for continuous blooming. Lyreleaf Sage can be mowed in late spring or early summer, after it has gone to seed. Creeping Sage can be clipped down once or twice in the summer, if desired. Lyreleaf and Creeping Sage may need water if planted in full sun or during extended drought.

Other Species

A wonderful but uncommon find for Central and North Florida gardens is perennial Sky Blue Salvia (Salvia azurea), with light-blue flowers the color of a cloudless sky, appearing in late summer and early fall. Plant several in a cluster, a few inches apart, in a mixed bed in full sun in very well-drained, sandy soils. Stems reach 2-3 feet high or more. Foliage is sparse and plants die to the ground in the winter.

Site Conditions

Scarlet Sage does best in moist (but not wet), well-drained sandy soils with full sun to afternoon shade. It can tolerate some salt spray.

Lyreleaf Sage prefers moist ground and partial shade, but will tolerate full sun.

Creeping Sage does well in bright shade and prefers moist soils, although it will adapt to dry shade. It will tolerate full sun but be stressed in hot weather.

CAUTION

Many non-native Salvias are sold in garden centers and other large retail outlets, with minimal identification.