

Sage Kindles Holiday Memories

“How many childhood memories are inextricably linked to the warm, homelike odor of sage in the stuffing for Thanksgiving turkey or a Christmas goose?” (Craig Claiborne, the former food editor of *The New York Times*, in his *An Herb and Spice Cook Book*)

What does sage remind you of? Food? Memories? Other aromas, perhaps? This herb is associated with rosemary, thyme, oregano, parsley, and bay. Surely, this conjures up lovely images for people who love to cook, or at least, those who love to eat!

When you are buying a plant and know its Latin name so you can be assured that you are buying what you think you are buying. Attempting to buy sage could otherwise be a confusing quest, in view of how many types are available for purchase.

Fresh culinary sage has a slightly lemony in flavor. When dried, the flavor is stronger and slightly mustier. It is a basic ingredient in poultry stuffing. The common culinary variety or “garden sage,” has a Latin name called *officinalis*. Making this distinction is useful since sage comes from a very large family of plants (called *Salvia*) with varied characteristics too numerous to list.

Searching for the right kind of sage with a particular aim might take some researching. Except for its culinary use during the holidays, I see sage primary as an ornamental. Considering the fact that there are tall ones, short ones and ones that grow wide, there is an abundant medley of choices in this family of herbs. Some varieties are annual, some perennial and some grow as bushes.

There are types with silver colored leaves, dark green leaves or narrow leaves and with spikes of indigo. There are the annual dwarf types that creep low on the ground like Scarlet pygmy and St. John’s Fire. There are the willowy types like Russian sage or a fast growing gray-green type called Mealy-cup, a favorite of flower arrangers. And yes, sage blooms in a myriad of colors.

Eleven varieties are listed with helpful descriptions in the *Sunset New Western Garden book*. (The newer version of the book might list even more) This book, one I refer to as the bible of gardeners and along with the *California Master Gardener Handbook*, is a good place to begin to research.

To view different varieties of live plants, the Garden of the Sun has a spectacular fall sage display at the time of this writing. (3rd week of October)

Nearly all varieties of sage are suitable for San Joaquin's planting zones, (and most other zones too) Some, such as the Mexican sage require lots of room. It has beautiful fall blooming indigo-colored spires of bloom that attract bees and other wildlife. It is impressive enough turn heads, especially my own. It is so gorgeous, I must forgive it for occupying so much space and begging to be cut, shaped and controlled, but so worth it!

Ramona Frances of Madera is a University of California Master Gardener. She can be contacted by e-mail at garden@psnw.com. This column is provided by the University Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Program in Madera County. The Master Gardener program extends research based information in home horticulture and pest management, verified by University of California experts to the citizens of our state. Call you U.C. Cooperative Extension Office in Madera with your gardening questions at 559-675-7879 Ext.204 to leave a msg, or stop by the office on Mondays from 1:00 - 3:00 p.m. to speak to a Master Gardener in person.