

## Lyre-Leaved Sage

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*Salvia lyrata* (Lamiaceae) is a common wildflower found throughout the eastern United States and Canada. Its ornamental and horticultural qualities are discussed, as are its propagation and wildlife value.

KEYWORDS: *Salvia*, Lamiaceae, Florida, butterfly garden plant, hummingbird plant, native plant, perennial.

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The mint family (Lamiaceae) is a large one and many of its members are well known for their culinary and horticultural uses. Within the mint family, which includes such familiar plants as basil, oregano and rosemary, one genus stands apart by its mere size. *Salvia*, the genus to which sage belongs, is a vast assemblage of approximately 700 species of annuals, perennials and shrubs found throughout the world.

The most widely cultivated of Florida's 10 native species of *Salvia* is red sage, *Salvia coccinea*. Red sage is an annual or short-lived perennial with good-sized brilliant red flowers. It is useful for attracting butterflies and hummingbirds or for providing a bright accent in the garden. Red sage is easily grown from seed in almost any well-drained sunny location and the recent development of white, pink and bicolor cultivars will no doubt increase its popularity among the general gardening public.

Often overlooked in favor of its flashier cousin is another Florida native sage, the lyre-leaved sage, *Salvia lyrata*. Lyre-leaved sage is, biologically, hugely successful judging from its range: nearly the whole of the United States east of the Mississippi River. However, it is a modest plant and can easily escape notice unless it is growing and flowering in large masses.

*Salvia lyrata* is a perennial that bears its foliage in a basal rosette. The leaves are lobed with the terminal lobe much larger than the others, a condition referred to as *lyrate* in technical botanical jargon and which explains both the species and common names. The leaves are usually conspicuously marked with burgundy or chocolate colored markings along the principal veins. Thus, lyre-leaved sage is a member of a very exclusive club: native Florida plants with variegated leaves.

In spring, a spike of purplish blue flowers is produced from the center of the rosette. The plant will continue flowering while good conditions persist; however, if it is stressed, normal flowers are replaced by specialized flowers that self-fertilize in bud and set seed without ever opening. This phenomenon is known as *cleistogamy*, a technical term derived from Greek that literally means *secret marriage*. Plants growing under great stress, such as during a drought, will produce only cleistogamous flowers.

Some populations, at the extreme southern range of the species, appear to be short-lived and never seem to produce normal flowers. There is a possibility that the production of cleistogamous flowers and an annual lifespan have become genetically fixed in these populations.

Like red sage, *Salvia lyrata* is extremely easy to grow in well-drained but rich soils under conditions ranging from full sun to rather dense shade, and it will also attract butterflies and hummingbirds. In nature, seeds are dormant during the summer but readily germinate in late winter or early spring. Seedlings grow quickly and, if started early in the season, will flower when only a few months old.

Beneath dappled shade in rich moist woods, *Salvia lyrata* reaches its fullest development. Under such conditions, one can find dozens of plants covering many square feet and transforming large patches of ground into a blue haze. When grown in a similar manner in cultivation, I find *Salvia lyrata* more attractive than many other flashier and well-known native wildflowers. Lyre-leaved sage is also easily grown as a pot plant.

Although related to true sage, *Salvia lyrata* is not aromatic and does not have culinary uses. North of our area, it is known by the common name of *cancer weed*, but the origin and significance of this name are unknown to me.

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### UPDATES TO THE ORIGINAL ARTICLE

In the original article, I speculated that plants growing at the southern limit of the species' range on Florida's east coast (Martin County) might bear only cleistogamous flowers and that such plants may have an annual growth habit. Both speculations have turned out to be wrong and the Martin County plants will produce normal flowers, but only when conditions are ideal in the spring, and they are perennial.

Based on longer experience with lyre-leaved sage, I have found that the seeds of certain populations will not

germinate during warm weather. Such seeds lie dormant throughout the summer and germinate in the autumn. Also, the article should have pointed out that seedlings and young plants can sometimes greatly resemble the young plants of certain fleabanes (*Erigeron* species); however, the sage will have opposite leaves, while the fleabanes will have alternate leaves.

Lastly, I was not aware of the significance of the common name *cancer weed*. I have now discovered that the name is derived from its use as a folk remedy for cancer. The fresh leaves have been used to remove warts, therefore, I presume that the cancer for which it was used was skin cancer.

**NOTE:** This is the author's PDF version of an article published in *The Palmetto*, the journal of the Florida Native Plant Society. The PDF and print versions differ substantially in formatting and pagination and an update has been added to the PDF version. The print version may be cited as:

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