

Sage (*Salvia officinalis*) is a hardy perennial in our area. It is easy to grow so long as three requirements are met – (1) plenty of sunshine, (2) good drainage and (3) good air circulation. It is attractive in the garden year-round and has purple, pink, blue or white flowers in summer. It is commonly used as a stuffing for poultry, rabbit, pork, and baked fish and in sausage or meat loaves.

Prepare the soil. Sage grows well in rich clay loam that drains well and is rich in nitrogen. It prefers soil with a pH of 6.0 to 6.5.

If you're using clay soil, add sand and organic matter to lighten the soil and help with drainage.

Sage grows best with other perennial herbs that favor grittier soil, such as thyme, oregano, marjoram and parsley.

Do not overwater. When sage plants are young, you should water only enough to keep the soil moist. *Once established*, only water sage when the soil surrounding the plant is dry to the touch. Sage is a tough little plant and is very drought-tolerant.

Provide adequate sunlight. Ideally, sage plants should grow in full sun, but they will also survive light shade in hotter areas.

Sage growing in too much shade, will become leggy and flop over. If you keep your sage plant in an indoor area without much sunlight, you may need to provide additional fluorescent lighting - Use standard fluorescent lights 2 - 4 inches over the plants. High output fluorescent, compact fluorescent, or high intensity discharge (metal halide or high pressure sodium) plant growing lights work better – Place these 2–4 feet above the plants.

Prevent mildew. Mildew is one of the few problems sage has. Prevent mildew by watching the plants carefully during hot, humid weather and by thinning the plants regularly to increase air

circulation. Mulching the earth around the plant with pebbles also helps moisture to evaporate more quickly.

Control pests. Sage is usually not a target for pests, but sometimes it will be affected by spider mites, thrips, and Spittlebugs. If you notice any pests, try using an organic pesticide (like pyrethrum) or an insecticidal soap to keep them under control.

Replace the plant every three to five years. After about three to five years, the sage plant will become woody and straggly - Start again with a new plant or seed, or use the old plant for cuttings or layering.

To layer the plant, bend a branch of the existing sage towards the soil. Use some wire to pin the branch to the ground, about 4 inches from the tip. After about four weeks, roots will begin to form. Then you can cut the branch and transplant the newly formed sage plant to another location.

To use cuttings, cut the top 3 inches from the branch of an existing sage plant. Strip the lower leaves from the stem, or use a scissors to cut them off. Dip the ends in rooting hormone, then place in sterile sand. Wait 4 to 6 weeks for roots to form, then move to a pot and later the garden.

Harvest the sage. Harvest the sage lightly during the first year, picking off leaves as you need them.

In subsequent years, you can harvest the sage year round by cutting entire stems from the plant. Sage is considered to be at its best just before the flowers bloom, usually in mid-summer.

Do your last full harvest approximately two months before the first major frost of the year. This gives any newly formed foliage enough time to mature before winter sets in.

Dry the sage. Sage is one of the few herbs that develops a stronger flavor when dried. However, it needs to be dried quickly to avoid developing a musty taste. To dry sage, tie a bunch of sprigs together and hang them upside down in a warm, well-ventilated location away from direct sunlight. Once they are dry, store the leaves (crumbled or whole) in an airtight container.

Use the sage. In addition to being used as an aromatic herb in cooking, sage can also be used in potpourri and soap. Sage pairs perfectly with rosemary and thyme in many dishes. Besides its versatility and compatibility with other spices, sage has ample health benefits too. For years, herbalists have recommended sage tea for treating upset stomachs and sore throats (one study found that spraying sore throats with a sage solution gave effective pain relief), and recent research found links between sage, memory function and improved mood.



Today in the Garden

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Growing and Using Sage

