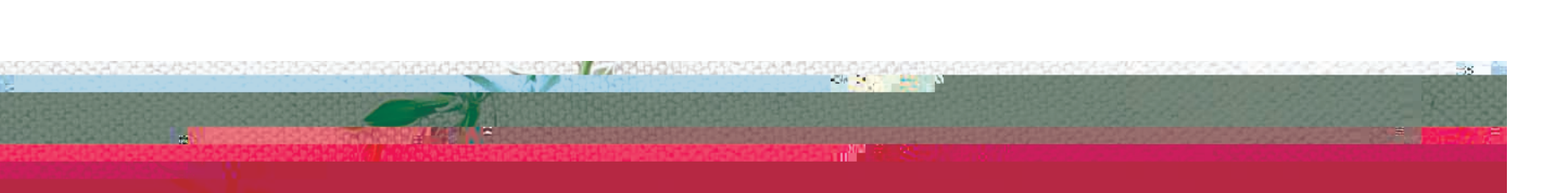


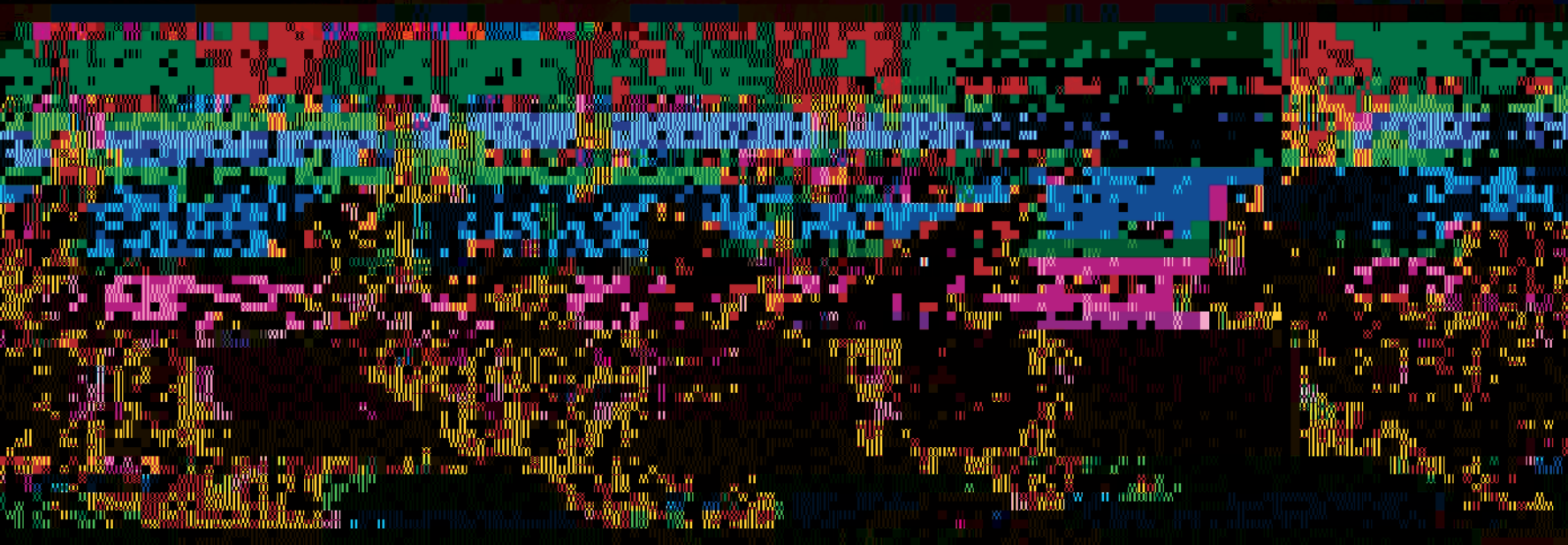
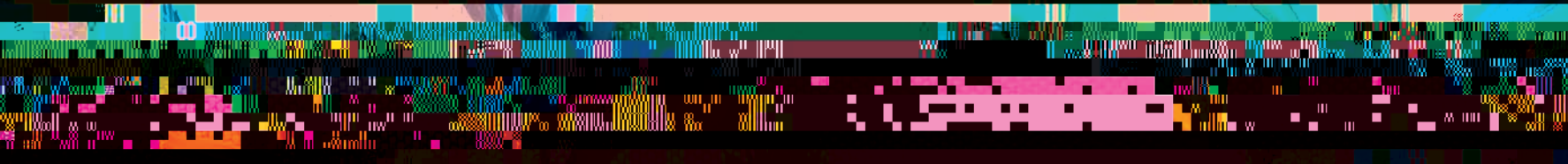
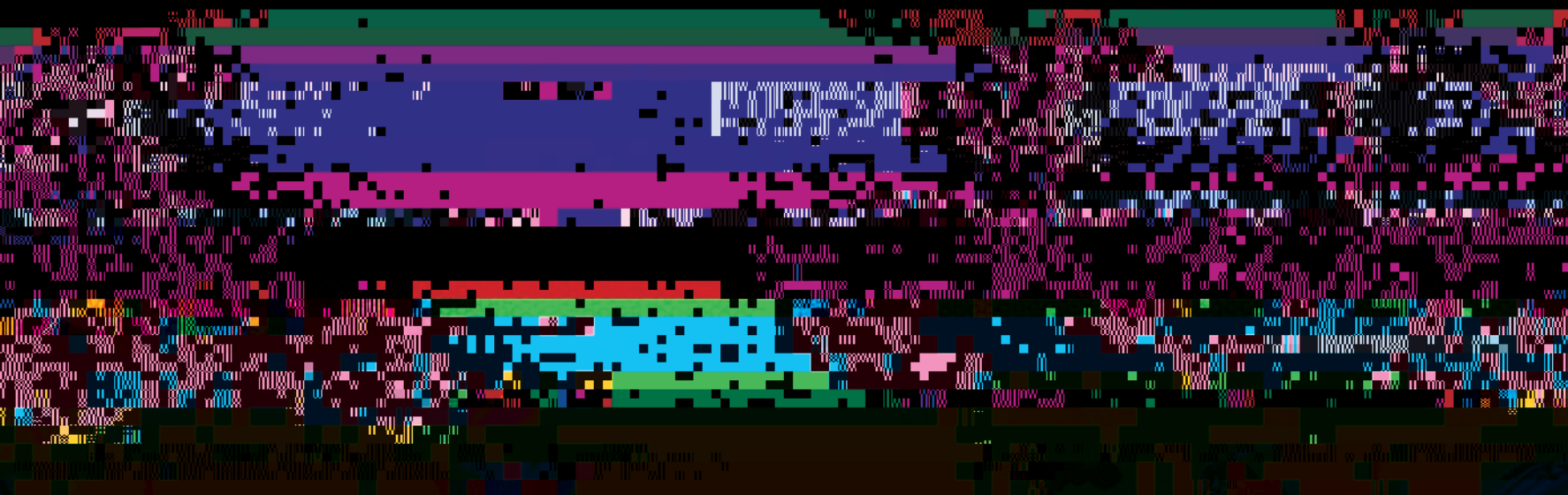
Terrific tender

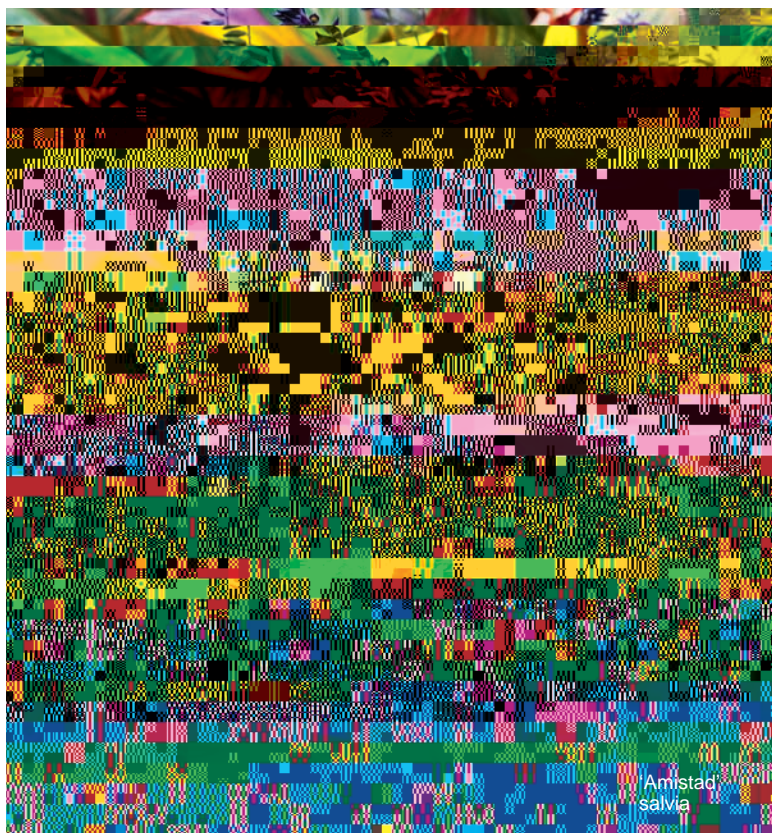
This test shows which ones are worth growing, even if it's for just one year

BY RICHARD HAWKE

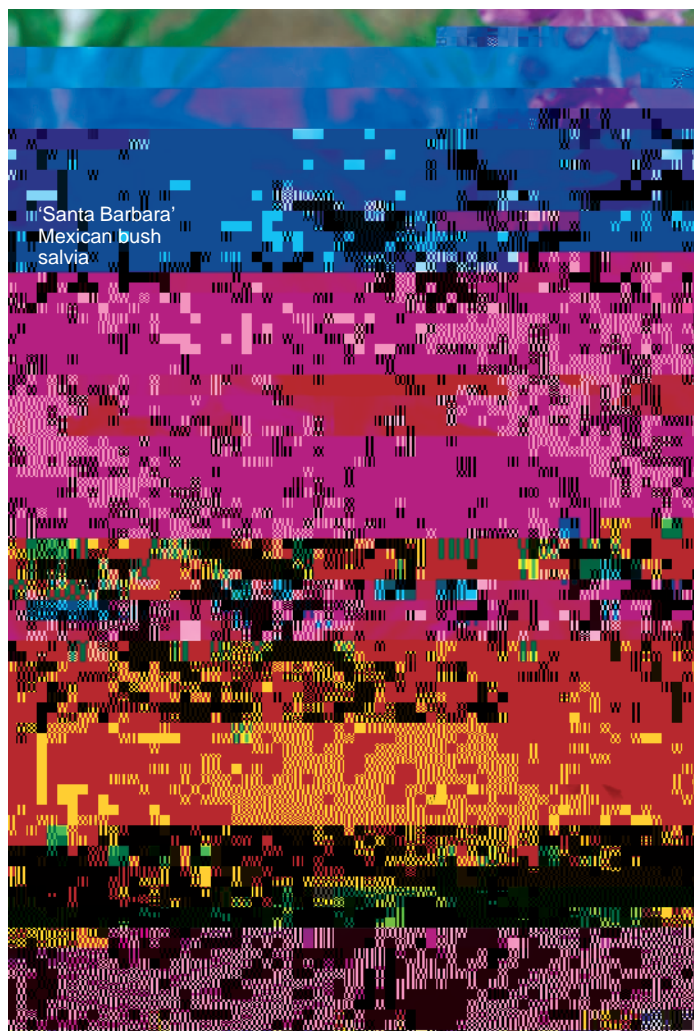


Patience is a virtue, as I've been reminded too many times. Whether that's true or not, I waited over 20 years to evaluate tender salvias, which are hardy in warm regions but not reliable in my Zone 5 winters. My craving for all types of salvias is never-ending—I've grown the hardy perennials and the colorful annuals—but I covet the beguiling tender salvias most of all. Over the past three years, a dazzling salvia-filled bed delighted us at the Chicago Botanic Garden from the warm days of early summer to the first frosts of autumn. Perhaps the long wait made it all the sweeter, because it was truly a colorful, eye-opening, and lively

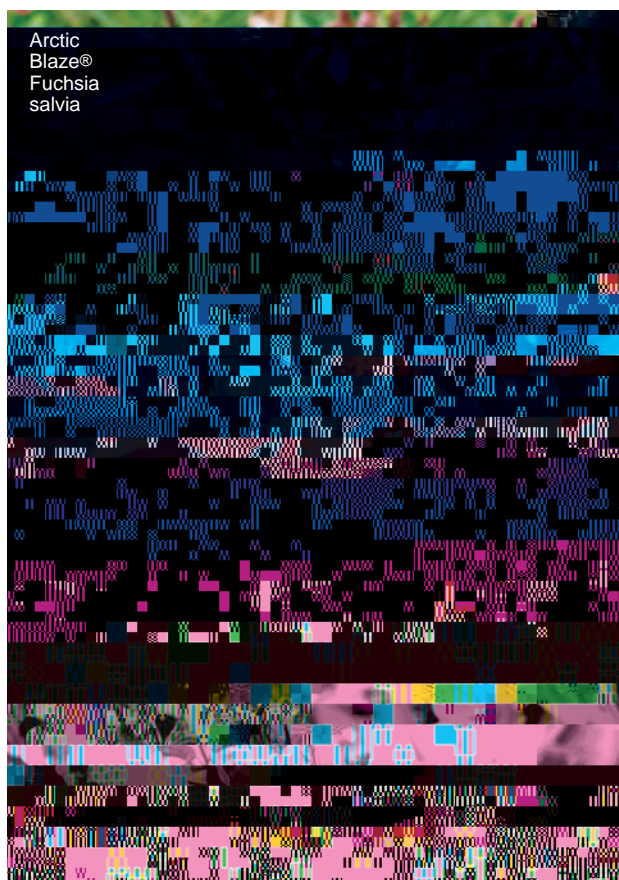




Amistad
salvia



'Santa Barbara'
Mexican bush
salvia



Arctic
Blaze®
Fuchsia
salvia

trial. Months of rainbow-hued flowers, habits great and small, and leaves in diverse colors and shapes—each with its own distinctive scent—are hallmarks of the tender salvias. Our goal was simple: to discover the best tender salvias that are vigorous enough their first year in the garden to make excellent annuals in cooler zones. From early summer to late fall, we enjoyed seemingly endless days of colorful flowery splendor, and we only scratched the surface of the hundreds of lush and exotic selections available by mail order and in garden centers. Rather than settling for off-the-shelf annuals next summer, look for a few choice tender salvias to turn up the seasonal color and drama.

Top performers to try

I first saw Mexican bush salvia (*S. leucantha*) in San Francisco, where its fuzzy purple-white flowers were an unexpected sight in late autumn. Naturally, I wanted it in the trial but thought the late bloom would be a problem for us; instead, its downfall was that its tall, brittle stems snapped in strong winds. While the contrast in flower and calyx colors (sidebar p. 41) is not as striking as the species, 'Santa Barbara' Mexican bush salvia (*S. leucantha* 'Santa Barbara') is a superior compact selection with light purple flowers and fuzzy, dark purple calyces. Flower production was exceptionally heavy from early fall to frost. The narrow, downy, gray-green leaves were attractive all sea-

Photos, except where noted: Danielle Sherry. Photos p. 36: milleitephotomedia.com (bottom left); N ova Photo Graphik/gapphotos.com (top right). Photo p. 37: Joshua McCullough.



A (P M E F O % F M J D J P V T
Q J O F B Q Q M F T B M W J B

son, which is an important ornamental feature given the late bloom period. The habit was diminutive by comparison to the species—nearly 20 inches shorter and narrower—and, more importantly, the stems were not as fragile.

"S D U J D # W B I F J B (S B M O V A S I f u c ') was one of three strong-blooming selections in a series featuring exceptional habit uniformity. Deep reddish pink flowers with purplish calyces were plentiful from early summer to season's end. All kinds of pollinators were regular visitors on these selections, but bees were particularly busy in midfall. All of the Arctic Blaze[®] salvias had compact bushy habits with purplish stems, but Arctic Blaze[®] Fuchsia was the smallest, sporting the best and tightest habit. Unlike some salvias, Arctic Blaze[®] salvias have square, flexible stems, so breakage was not a problem in our windy site.

A " N J T U B E (S T A M I S T A D ') known commonly as the friendship salvia, was the touchstone for comparing tender salvias. From early summer to hard frost, a bounty of purple blossoms nestled in nearly black calyces graced robust stems; it was one of the biggest salvias in the trial. The prodigious floral show and vigorous habit were impressive each summer despite never being fertilized. The large, swarthy flowers were a constant draw for hummingbirds, bees, butterflies, and other beneficial pollinators. If time was short when giving a tour, I made a bee-line to 'Amistad' salvia, since it so perfectly embodied the best qualities of the tender salvias.

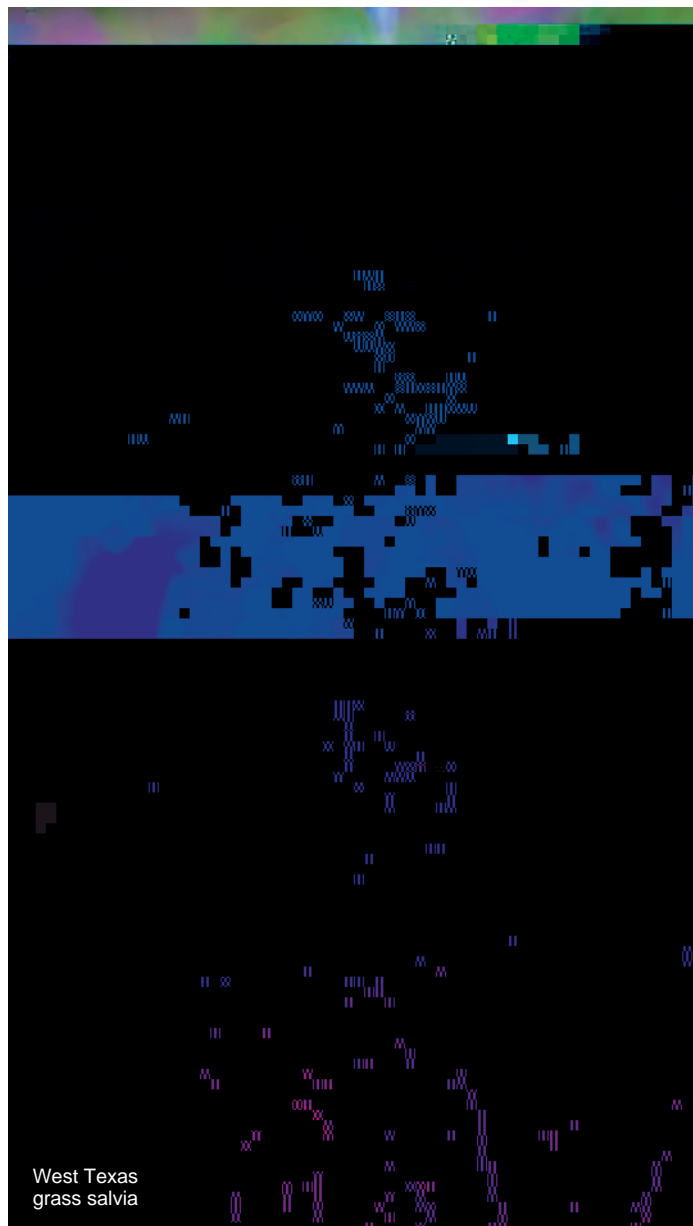
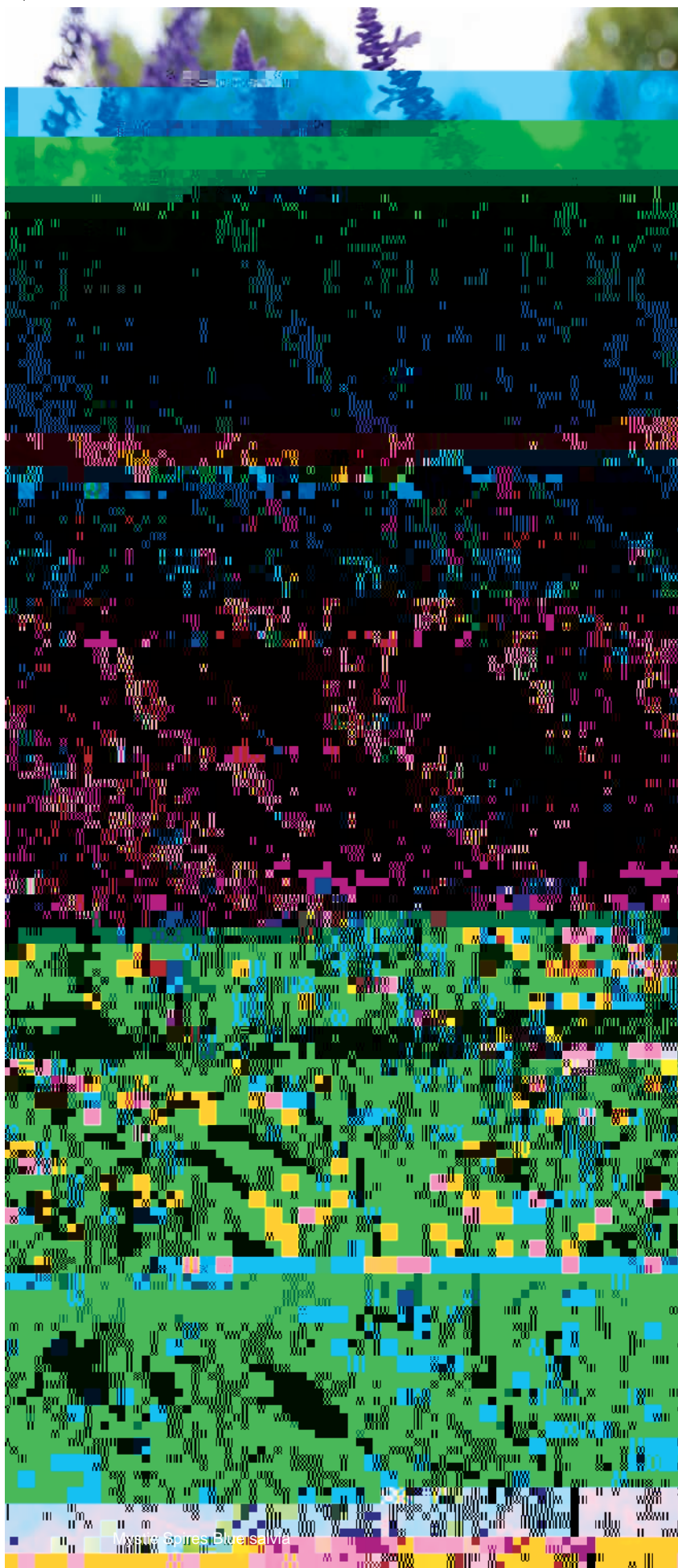
The sweetly scented, sumptuous yellow leaves of (P M E F O % F M J D J P V T Q J O F B Q Q M F T B M W J B (S C E L E G A N T E G M I L D D e l i c i o u s ') would be gratifying on their own for most gardeners. But upon seeing

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Salvia
(Salvia spp. >
and cvs.)

Sages, as salvias are commonly known, are a large group of plants. When it comes to hardiness, things can get a little tricky, so here's a breakdown of the subcategories they fall into.

- t 1 & 3 & // * " - 4 " - 7 * " 4 Hardy to a wide range of zones, returning reliably each year
- t 5 & / % & 3 4 " - 7 * " 4 Considered perennials only in warmer locales (Zones 6b–10); in all other areas, they need to be overwintered inside or they will die
- t " // 6 " - 4 " - 7 * " 4 Only live one season, eventually going to seed and dying

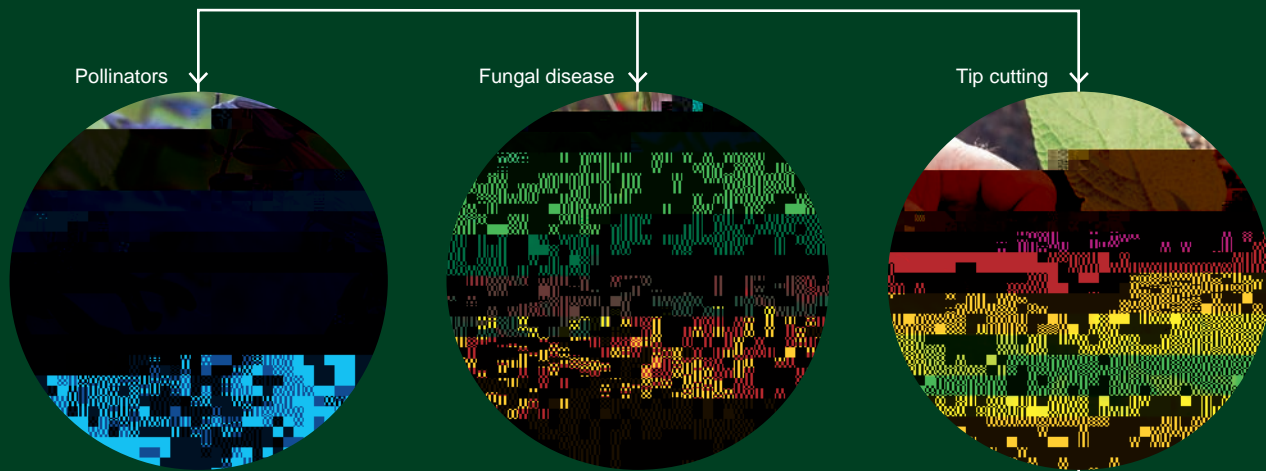


its fiery red flowers arching over the radiant foliage, you would understand that something was missing. Unfortunately for gardeners in the far north, 'Golden Delicious' begins blooming almost too late except in mild autumns with a late frost. If you are lucky and the weather holds, the full glory of the sultry, dark red flowers blazing above the golden foliage is awe-inspiring. The leaves can scald in strong sunlight, so some afternoon shade is best, especially in warmer regions. 'Golden Delicious' won't disappoint, whether in a mixed container, massed, or on its own.

With its pungent, fine-textured grassy foliage and strong shrubby habit, West Texas grass salvia (*S. reptans*) carried the show for most of the summer. Long before one flower ever appeared, plants reached a bushy 39 inches tall and wide. The cobalt blue flowers began opening in midsummer and

Photos: Jonathan Buckley (p. 38, right); S & O/gapphotos.com (p. 39, top right); milletphotomedia.com (p. 40, top left); Bill Johnson (p. 40, top center and bottom); Michael Howes/gapphotos.com (p. 40, top right); Martin Hughes-Jones/gapphotos.com (p. 41, top right); Illustration: Kate Gosselin.

Tender salvias at a glance



Salvias are generally undemanding, easy-care plants. However, they do have a series of unique traits that make them particularly noteworthy.

CONDITIONS: They grow best in moist, well-drained soils, although some—such as pineapple salvia, Canary Island salvia, and West Texas grass salvia—are drought resistant. Partial to high shade is recommended in hot climates for autumn salvias, eyelash-leaved salvias, and Bolivian salvia, among others.

POLLINATORS: Hummingbirds flitting around the salvias caused quite a stir with visitors and photographers alike. Near collisions were a daily and often comical happening. Although our observations were anecdotal, what looked to be the hummingbirds' slight preference for blue and purple flowers was intriguing. Bees and butterflies were more catholic in their tastes, exuberantly sampling all colors, including blue (pictured).

DISEASES/PESTS: Although the salvias were trouble free, they can be affected by powdery mildew, rust, stem rot, fungal leaf spots, whiteflies, aphids, and spider mites. Most salvias are resistant to deer and rabbits because of their scented foliage.

DEADHEADING: Removing spent blossoms promotes longer flowering and is often recommended, but we observed continuous bloom all summer even without pruning or fertilizing.

NATIVE RANGE/HARDINESS: Many of the tender salvias come from south of the U.S.-Mexico border, so winter hardiness was not expected in cooler zones. The only salvias with one or more plants surviving our Chicago winter were 'La Trinidad Pink' (*S. microphylla* 'La Trinidad Pink', pictured), cedar salvia (*S. roemeriana*), and West Texas grass salvia.

FROST: The salvias reacted differently to mild frost—some quickly turned black, while others wilted or dropped leaves yet continued to flower until a killing frost.

FLOWERING: Starts in early summer and ends with frost. Salvias' floral displays pack more punch than those of their perennial and annual siblings because the two-lipped flowers are cupped in colorful, sometimes prominent calyces. The calyx (pictured) can be an analogous or a contrasting color to the flower, and it usually remains vibrant and persistent after the flowers have fallen away.

PROPAGATION: This is done by taking tip cuttings and rooting (pictured) or by seeding.





SOURCES

r Annie's Annuals & Perennials, Richmond, CA; 888-266-4370; anniesannuals.com
r Flowers by the Sea, Elk, CA; 707-877-1717; fbtis.com

r Plant Delights Nursery, Raleigh, NC; 919-772-4794; plantdelights.com
r High Country Gardens, Shelburne, VT; 800-925-9387; highcountrygardens.com