**SAGE**

Fresh sage is a rather minor crop grown in the Yuma area with less than 10 acres in production. However, the impact of this crop in fine restaurants and grocery stores across the US is vast with increasing popularity.

Sage is a very popular herb grown throughout the Southwest. It is a shrubby perennial that may reach 18–24 inches tall, with a sprawling growth habit. Common sage has gray-green, wooly leaves. There are several cultivars: ‘tricolor’ has white and purple marbled leaves with pink margins, ‘Icterina’ has variegated gold and green leaves, and ‘Purpurascens’ has purple foliage. Lilac blue flowers appear in early to midsummer, typically the second year.

Sage can be grown from seed, stem cuttings or crown division although divided plants may take a time to recover from the division and will initially grow slower.

In the gardens of our American pioneers, herbs were the major source of seasonings for foods. They were also used for curing illnesses, storing with linens, strewing on floors, covering the bad taste of meats before refrigeration was devised, dyeing homespun fabrics and as fragrances.

With the advent of the supermarket, growing herbs in the garden declined because a wide range of dried herbs became available in stores. Now, however, with an increase in the popularity of ethnic foods, combined with a realization that fresh herbs have more distinctive tastes than some dried herbs, more restaurants are using at least a few herbs for fresh use in a variety of dishes. Increasing interest in herbal medicine also has helped to make producing herbs more popular today that in recent years.

A woody plant with oblong leaves that have a woolly, gray-green covering that is lighter on the bottom, sage may grow 2 feet high and tends to sprawl. Several forms are available, including purple-leaved, variegated-leaved and dwarf growing. Sage needs a sunny location and well-drained soil.

In the kitchens of fine restaurants, professional chefs demand and accept from their suppliers only the freshest fruits, vegetables, herbs and spices available. They recognize that the degree of freshness of these products has a tremendous impact on the dishes that they create.

Remember the lyrics of a popular 1960s Simon and Garfunkel tune: parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme? According to the Chattahoochee Unit of the Herb Society of America, these four herbs are included in a list of the top 10 culinary herbs grown and used by American chefs.

Whether you have acres of land to plant, or you are a small-space gardener who lives in a apartment overlooking the Yuma Valley, it’s rather simple to grow an amazing variety of fresh herbs that will add pizzazz to all cooking.
Technically, all plants with soft stems are called herbs, or herbaceous ornamentals. Herbaceous ornamentals die back into the ground in winter. Herbs can be annual, perennial and biennial plants. To narrow it down a bit, the plants commonly referred to as herbs are plants with leaves or stems used for their medicinal, flavorful or fragrant attributes. Plants prized for their roots, bark, seed and fruits are considered spices.

Collectively, herbs need sun. At a minimum, six hours of sunlight is necessary if herbs are to achieve full size and produce essential oils. If grown indoors, a southern or southwestern exposure that provides six to eight hours of light can produce a viable herb plant.

A favorite in Thanksgiving turkey stuffing and sausages, sage also is great as a rub for pork or chicken.

Prune leafy perennial herbs such as sage, rosemary, thyme, and oregano by removing a third of the top growth at a time. Heavy pruning promotes new growth, which keeps the plant “awake” and growing.

Herbs are best fresh, but most can be dried or frozen for later use. Before preserving herbs, wash them to remove dirt and other particles.

Common sage is a fine herb that also makes a good ornamental. Purple sage, tri-colored sage and golden sage all work well as ornamentals and top his list in terms of beauty. The leaves of pineapple sage smell just like pineapple, and the plant also produces beautiful red, tubular flowers that hummingbirds adore. There’s also a honeydew sage whose leaves smell just like its namesake fruit.

Sage was recognized as the Herb of the Year for 2001 but, it’s been around since the Dark Ages. The name “sage” is derived from the Latin word meaning health or healing powers. Sage has been used as a medicinal herb far longer than it has been a culinary herb. It was indispensable in the Dark Ages. The ancient Greeks and Romans administered sage for everything from snakebite to promoting longevity. Sage was steeped in hot water, as for tea, before tea became known. Introduced to American palettes in the 1800’s, medicinal usage of sage declined as the culinary use increased.

Nevadans are probably the most familiar with sage. Their state flower blanketing huge portions of the high desert is actually sagebrush. It is excellent fodder for the wild horses and other animals but has no place on our dinner tables. The sage that we consume is garden sage, botanical name salvia officinalis.

This greyish-green leafed member of the mint family had actually grown into the most popular herb in American cooking until after World War II, when oregano took over as the number one seasoning. Slightly bitter in flavor and highly aromatic, sage is one of the main ingredients in poultry seasoning. It enhances meats and poultry as well as most vegetables.

Fresh sage is far less bitter than dried sage but in either form, a little goes a long way. It is not particularly palatable fresh so add it sooner in the cooking process rather than near the end
as with most fresh herbs. Sage will stand up to long cooking times making it a natural for stewed or braised dishes.

Sage grows well in well-drained, sandy soil with full sun. With its furry leaves, dusky aroma and attractive habit of not growing much more than two feet high, sage serves a good border plant. Tri-color sage is a particularly colorful specimen.

Well-drained soil is essential to success when planting herbs. Interestingly enough, the herbs that are most successful in our climate are those suited to Mediterranean climates. Although the soils differ greatly, sandy soils of that drain well, while maintaining sufficient moisture and provide the perfect environment to allow the plants to take in the nutrients necessary for optimal growth.

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