Blue flowers make interesting accent in desert gardens

By Laura Murphy

Desert landscapes are noted for their many types of beautiful orange and yellow flowering shrubs. Yellow sennas, yellow and orange flowering birds-of-paradise, orange flowering Mexican honeysuckles are but a few reflecting common desert colors. Pinks and purples are also readily available when selecting flowering shrubs, but rare are those shrubs with blue flowers! Besides being unique, blue provides a cool contrast to the warm tones of yellow and orange. It's also a color in the landscape that glows with soft morning and evening lighting. Here are some of the best 'true-blue' flowering shrubs for desert landscapes:

Sky Flower (Duranta erecta) is an evergreen shrub with bright green, showy foliage and spikes of small medium-blue flowers topping long, upright stems. Small crape myrtle-like blossoms appear in late spring and remain until early fall. Plants grow up to eight feet tall and spread up to five feet. The open form of the shrub makes it easy to prune and maintain at a smaller size. Sky flower prefers full sun to light shade and soil enriched with organic amendments. It is not drought tolerant and frequent watering is required during hot weather. In colder locations, Sky flower may suffer some stem die-back, but it will recover rapidly in the spring. It can be used as a specimen plant, to provide a screen or as a background plant in shrub borders.

Mexican Blue Sage (Salvia chamaedryoides) is a small flowering shrub often used as a ground cover at the base of trees and larger shrubs. It grows in a mounding form to a height and spread of 2 feet. Mexican Blue Sage has small light blue flowers. The flowers are scattered on spikes set above small, but dense, silvery-green foliage. Most of the blossoms appear in spring
and fall, but flowering can be extended into the summer with regular weekly irrigation. Mexican Blue Sage grows best in partial shade in soil amended with a small amount of organic matter.

Cleveland Sage (Salvia clevelandii) is a mounding plant 3 to 4 feet high and up to 6 feet wide. It has blue to violet-blue flowers, arranged in a tiered effect on tall upright spikes. The flowers, most abundant in spring and early summer, are long lasting and are ideal for dried flower arrangements. The leaves of this sage are green and aromatic, and have been used to make teas. Cleveland Sage grows best in full sun. Water every week or two from fall through spring. After flowering has ceased in late spring, water only enough to keep the soil from becoming bone-dry. Cleveland Sage goes summer-dormant and may rot if over-watered then.

Blue Plumbago (Plumbago auriculata) is an evergreen shrub with pure light to sky blue flowers. It has a mounding form that provides a cascading effect when planted in containers. When planted in shrub beds it grows to a height of 3 feet with a spread of 4 feet. Blue Plumbago has attractive medium green foliage and its large clusters of phlox-like blue flowers cover the plant from May through September. In colder locations it will freeze back some but rapidly regrows in the spring. Blue Plumbago grows best in light to medium shade and soils amended with organic matter. This is not a drought tolerant plant, so abundant water must be provided during hot weather.

Laura Murphy is a Lake Havasu City Master Gardener. Information from John Begemen of the University of Arizona. For more information, contact the Lake Havasu City Master Gardeners by calling their Hot Line at 505-4105. Visit us at Home Garden Day, the first Tuesday of each month from 11-1 at the Library.