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When the barometer falls – these plants burst into bloom

By Laura Murphy

The middle of August is a good time to look around at landscapes and see which plants are doing well and which are not. This can help you decide on choosing plants for your own yard that will not only survive the summer but will look good doing so. One of the plants that sticks out this month as doing well and looking good is called Texas sage.

The plants from the genus of *Leucophyllum* are variously known as Texas sage, Texas ranger, or Chihuahuan sage. They have also been called the Barometer bush because they reliably burst into bloom when humidity goes up and we get any amount of precipitation. Whatever you call them, they are superb choices for our low desert gardens. They take our sun, our heat, our soil and our water in stride. They are attractive, low maintenance, drought tolerant and have periodic displays of gorgeous blossoms to boot. The only hard part is deciding which variety to plant. To help guide you in your selection here are a few tips to keep in mind.

The first decision to be made is how large of a plant do you want. This should be based on the available space and the mature size of the plant. Putting a plant that will quickly outgrow its allotted space means more work for you to keep it pruned. It also means the natural form of the plant will be lost. Some varieties such as those from the *frutescens* species can become quite large, up to about eight feet tall and six to eight feet wide. Others from the *laevigatum* species are smaller, topping out about four feet tall and wide.

The second decision for your Texas sage is leaf color. Shades range from medium gray-



green such as the common Green Cloud cultivar, to light gray, to almost white as in cultivars from the *candidum* species. This is a personal choice based on the color scheme of your garden and house.

Lastly, flower color must be considered. Texas sage will bloom in waves repeatedly from spring until fall, most often in response to humidity and rains. Some varieties such as White Cloud have clear white blossoms. Most of the cultivars have varying shades of pink to mauve. A few have either blue or dark purple blossoms. These blossoms are lightly fragrant in many species, adding another desirable characteristic.

Here are just a few of the varieties you will commonly find. Talk to your local nursery or garden center for a list of other or more unusual varieties.

‘Green Cloud’ – gray-green leaves, magenta flowers, large size 6-8’ tall and wide.

‘White Cloud’ – gray-green leaves, white flowers, slightly smaller size 5-6’ tall and wide.



‘Compacta’ – gray-green leaves, light purple flowers, 4-5’ tall and wide.

‘Silver Cloud’ – white foliage, deep purple flowers, 5-6’ tall and wide.

‘Heavenly Cloud’ – dense dark green foliage, indigo flowers, 4-6’ tall and wide.

‘Rain Cloud’ – gray foliage, dark purple flowers, 4-6’ tall and wide.

‘Rio Bravo’ – dense green leaves, lavender flowers, 5-6’ tall and wide.

Regardless of the cultivar you choose, most Texas sages have the same requirements for care. Of utmost importance is good drainage to prevent root rot. Plants prefer to be placed in full sun, even areas with reflected sun however they will tolerate part shade. Be aware though that when planted in part shade locations, the plants will have a more open, sparse appearance and the blossoms will not be as profuse.

Texas sages are quite drought tolerant when established, showing their native southwest desert heritage. Water deeply every couple of weeks in the summer to keep an acceptable landscape appearance. Care should be taken to not over-water especially during the summer months when root rot can become a problem.

These plants are primarily evergreen. They will thin out some in the colder winter months and will lose leaves during drought situations. Litter is generally low and there are no thorns or pods to contend with.

Rabbits do not particularly like Texas sage but are attracted to any newly planted plant. Protect your new shrub with a ring of chicken wire until it is a little bigger. After that time the

rabbits will occasionally nibble on the lower branches but it is usually not enough to cause harm to the plant.

Landscape uses are many for this versatile group of shrubs. They are often planted as a hedge and can accept shearing to create a formal looking screen. When allowed to grow with minimal pruning, an attractive and graceful shrub could be a focal point in your garden, especially when in full bloom during the summer months. Because of their drought tolerance, they make good choices for the drier parts of you landscape and are perfect for transitional areas.

The cooler weather is approaching and along with it our best planting season for shrubs. Now is the time to do some research and make your decisions about what to plant. Texas sage plants will abound in nurseries and garden centers soon. With so many wonderful cultivars showing up to choose from, you may need to find planting areas for several varieties.

Laura Murphy is a Lake Havasu City Master Gardener. 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.

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