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Fig. 1 Robin Middleton

Many years ago, when I had only just started gardening, I found myself sitting next to a famous garden writer at a lunch party. Over the mushroom risotto I happily chattered on about my newfound passion for irises, peonies, delphiniums and roses.

The famous writer asked: “And what’s your garden like later on in the summer?” Well, I said rather apologetically, there wasn’t that much colour after July. He gave me a withering look. “Anyone can have a good garden in May and June,” he said. “What you do after that shows whether you’re a serious gardener or not.”

I felt rather aggrieved by his comment, but I knew he had a point. When I had visited Great Dixter one September, the blaze of colour in the borders had filled me with wonder. Yet my attempts to

recreate something of the same effect with dahlias, echinaceas and lots of lush foliage, had failed, thwarted by the abundant slugs and snails in my London garden. I had decided that mine was just not an autumn garden.

Five or six years ago, a gardening friend suggested I try growing salvias for late summer colour. “Have a look at Robin Middleton’s salvia list,” she said. “He has a wonderful selection.” Intrigued, I went online and looked at the seeds he was offering for sale. I was already growing a few salvias, but until then I had never realised quite how large and diverse the genus is, containing well over 900 species.

I ordered some of Robin’s seeds, he sent a friendly email in reply, and we started corresponding. That June, my husband and I drove out to Bagshot in

Smitten by salvias

Constance Craig Smith

Surrey to visit him. The address he gave us had a house name but no street number, and I was a bit anxious as to whether we’d find his house. I needn’t have worried: as we drove down the street there was absolutely no mistaking where Robin lived. While his neighbours’ front gardens were full of neat bedding plants, Robin’s was a fiesta of colour from an exuberant hedge of salvias.

We had tea and cake before Robin’s partner Peter Vidgeon – a name that will be familiar to salvia enthusiasts, as Robin named a particularly nice pink salvia after him (fig. 2) – tactfully took my non-gardening husband off, while Robin showed me round the garden.

Even though it was early in the season for salvias, what was already in flower was glorious.



Fig. 2 *Salvia* 'Peter Vidgeon'

There were salvias in the most vivid blue, salmon pink, pillar-box red, glowing orange, bright yellow ... it was like walking through a horticultural Disney World. "This is nothing," Robin said. "Wait till you see it in September!"

Robin had no horticultural training and had spent most of his working life with British Airways. He had thought all salvias were like the gaudy red *S. splendens* you see in park bedding displays. But after he visited

a friend's garden and saw a spectacular *Salvia sclarea* var. *turkestanica*, he got hooked on them. Using his BA staff discount, he started travelling to conferences on salvias all over the world and meeting other enthusiasts. His fame as a salvia expert grew, and he also started successfully breeding new varieties.

Although Robin had a collection of over 100 different salvias in his garden, he was never interested in having a National Collection. "I only want to grow the best plants, and be free to choose what I grow," he told me. He didn't open his garden to the public in any organised way, but if someone expressed an interest in salvias he would always invite them round to visit. He had also set up a tremendously useful website, www.robinssalvias.com, with photographs and descriptions of salvias.

Having fired up my enthusiasm, Robin was generous with his time and expertise. He encouraged me to start with the hardiest and most easy-going of the salvias, the shrubby ones that mostly originate from Central and South America. These include the bright red *Salvia* 'Royal Bumble' (fig. 3), creamy yellow *S.* 'Crème Caramel', *S.* 'Blue Note', and *S. microphylla* 'Blue Monrovia', all beauties and all hardy to -5 to -10°C, as long as they're planted in



Fig. 3 *Salvia* 'Royal Bumble'



Fig. 4 *S. microphylla* 'Cerro Potosí'

a sunny spot with a bit of shelter and free-draining soil.

One of the first hardy salvias I grew was *S. microphylla* 'Cerro Potosí' (fig. 4), which has vivid magenta pink flowers. I have a bit of a love/hate relationship with this one. It grows like crazy, producing masses of seed, but rather meanly I think I'd be fonder of it if it weren't such a vigorous grower.

One of my favourites is *Salvia* 'Nachtvlinder' (fig. 5), which blooms from June to November, producing an endless succession of small, dainty purple flowers. I'm less enamoured of the ubiquitous red and white of *S.* 'Hot Lips', which I tolerate in a corner of my garden but simply can't bring myself to love. I much prefer another two-tone salvia, *S.* Amethyst Lips.

There are also some wonderful blues of recent introduction: *S. microphylla* 'Delice Aquamarine', which is a charming sky blue, and the Australian-bred *S.* 'So Cool Pale Blue', a subtle shade of blue and mauve (fig. 6).

When it comes to placing salvias in the garden, it pays to do your homework. Some of the most exotic and striking of them need winter protection, like my beloved *Salvia oxyphora*, which has wonderfully



Fig. 5 *Salvia* 'Nachtvlinder'



Fig. 6 *S.* 'So Cool Pale Blue'



Fig. 7 *S. patens*

fluffy lipstick-pink flowers, or the orange *S. confertiflora*. Others are borderline hardy, like red-flowered *Salvia fulgens* and the intense blue *S. patens* (fig. 7), but there are plenty of reliably hardy varieties to choose from.

One of the stars of my garden this summer has been the bright blue *S. guaranitica* 'Super Trouper', which Robin bred; it's a great variety for the back of the border. Then there is the hugely popular *S.* 'Amistad', which will grow to about 1.2m, has purple flowers and black calyces, and flowers from May to November (fig. 8).

S. 'Amistad' was discovered at a plant show by the dashing Argentinian university professor Rolando Uria, who is a passionate and knowledgeable salvia expert. Rolando spotted the plant's potential, and distributed it amongst

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Fig. 8 *Salvia* 'Amistad'

his friends and fellow gardeners, including Robin. When it was introduced commercially it became a huge success.

'Amistad' means friendship in Spanish, and two years ago Rolando launched a salvia he had bred himself, which is very similar to *S. 'Amistad'* in height and growth habit.

S. 'Amante', which means 'lover' in Spanish, has striking deep-pink flowers. In early summer I found it a bit underwhelming, but it really came into its own from September onwards, throwing out flowers with gay abandon. Both *S. 'Amante'* and *S. 'Amistad'* have been reliably hardy down to about -5°C in my rather sheltered town garden, but they do need to be planted in really free-draining soil.

Another good hardy salvia is *S. nemorosa* 'Caradonna', with spikes of violet-blue flowers on purple-black stems (fig. 9). It will form a good clump and give you a second flush of flowers if you cut it back in August. I have it next to some pink and purple penstemons, and the combination works very well.



Fig. 9 *S. nemorosa* 'Caradonna'

One of the surprises in my garden last summer was the rosy-leaf sage, *S. involucrata* 'Bethellii'. It didn't do very much in its first year, but this past summer it went completely mad, producing dozens of deep-pink flowers from June to November. I'm told that all the involucratas, which include *S. i. 'Hadspen'*, *S. 'Joan'* and *S. 'Mulberry Jam'* (fig. 10), are fully hardy.

I always try to take 'insurance cuttings' of my favourite salvias before autumn, in case we get another Beast from the East. Salvias are great plants for greedy gardeners, because they are so easy to propagate from cuttings. For most of them, all you need to do is stick them in a mixture of grit and seed compost in summer, and within a few weeks they will have rooted. You can also save seeds of many varieties, although they won't all come true.

As I write this in late November, the salvias in my garden are still going strong because we haven't yet had any frost, and I can now hold my head up high and say that my garden looks pretty good in autumn. Once I got the hang of growing salvias, I wanted to find other plants that would complement them – rather like buying a beautiful dress and then feeling you ought to splash out on accessories to match.

I still can't grow echinaceas, but I've finally worked out how to grow dahlias; the secret is to go out every night at dusk between June and early August, armed with a torch, and pick off the slugs and snails attacking them. My family may mock me for my night-time sorties, but it works.

I've also added fuchsias, penstemons, *Verbena bonariensis*, rudbeckias and heleniums to the mix, but the salvias remain the stars of the show. One of the lovely things about them is that there are so many different ones to try, and I'm always hunting out new ones.

Happily, I've discovered a band of other salvia obsessives out there who have not only become friends, but will answer nerdy questions about salvias or help with identifications – Helen Brown from the HPS Devon Group; Ian and Teresa Moss, who run the Rare Plant Fairs; and Philippa Burrough from Ulting Wick in Essex, to name just a few.

Sadly, Robin died from cancer on 2nd January, 2020.



Fig. 10 *S. 'Mulberry Jam'*

The last time I saw him, in the autumn of 2019, he looked rather frail but was his usual cheery self, bringing two new salvias for me to try. Like all the best gardeners, he was generous and eager to

pass on his knowledge and inspire others. In sharing his expertise and his enthusiasm for salvias he has made me, and the many others whom he befriended, better gardeners. 🌿

Constance Craig Smith writes about gardening for the *Daily Mail* Weekend Magazine and *The English Garden*.

Peter Vidgeon, Robin's partner of 50 years, has kept Robin's website active, and it's still an excellent source of information on salvias – you'll find it at www.robinssalvias.com. There are many good nurseries selling salvias; I'd particularly recommend: www.middletonnurseries.co.uk