

# The Herbalist

By Dr. Kathy Girard, URI Master Gardener



## Sage (*Salvia officinalis*; Family Labiatae)

Sage is native to the Mediterranean and grows especially well in limestone formations with little soil. It is an easy-to-grow, hardy perennial that grows to a height of 2 ½ feet in New England gardens. The pebbled gray-green leaves appear on squared stems, turn hoary in late summer, and will remain on the plant in winter if they are not removed. In May their strongly scented bluish-lavendar flowers attract honeybees.

Once a venerated medicinal herb, it was said to prolong life. An ancient Latin proverb proclaims "*Cur moriatur homo cui Salvia crescit in horto.*" [Why should a man die when sage flourishes in his garden.] An English proverb says "*He that would live for aye, must eat Sage in May.*" Sage was thought to be beneficial when used as a poultice for snake bites; taken as a tonic to soothe nervous conditions; and cure palsy, sore throats, and depression. It was also used as a companion plant with Rue to keep noxious toads from valued plants and with Rosemary as the two herbs were thought to stimulate each other. Sage was also planted alongside cabbage to repel insects.

This herb is now known more as a culinary herb than a medicinal one and is most often used to flavor poultry dressing and sausage. It has been used in many cultures for centuries as a substitute for tea and many European country people eat the leaves with bread and butter.

Sage is easily grown from seed; two or three plants will provide enough leaves for culinary use during the first year. The keys to healthy, long-lived sage plants are a sunny spot protected from wind and a neutral, compost-enriched soil with plenty of moisture during the first year. Plants may be divided after flowering in their second year. When harvesting leaves, take them no later than September and remove only those from the top of the plant. Dry the leaves in the shade and rub them through a fine screen or between your fingers. Store the leaves in clean, dry bottles.