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Bobbie's Green Thumb

PEROVSKIA ATRIPLICIFOLIA **RUSSIAN SAGE**

Dilemma: what to do with a parched patch of land on which the sun beats down? Pretend you are in the Southwest and install such xeriscapic plants as *Fouquieria splendens* (Ocotillo), *Agave*, and *Opuntia violacea* (Purple Prickly Pear), or use plants that can survive desert-like conditions but do not necessarily “look” like desert plants.

It is important to understand that sites with desert-like conditions usually have either a southern or western exposure, thus subjecting most plants to a great deal of stress as they try to cope with dehydration from both sun and wind. Such stress will curtail flowering and bleach out the blossoms that do appear. Therefore, picking plants that are long bloomers will help to ameliorate this problem. Choosing plants with short or strong stems will help where it is windy.

Fortunately, although many of my gardens face south, the land is not parched because over the years, most of them have been heavily amended with organic material. However, for plants that

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will thrive in dry sunny sites, I add a lot of enlarged shale to increase drainage. The key to growing these plants is not zone hardiness but perfect drainage. Most of these plants are cold hardy, but their roots tend to rot during our wet winters.

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PERENNIAL FOCUS

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Russian Sage, a perennial with which most of you are familiar, is one that will thrive in a sunny dry site. Its appearance is unique – silvery stems and pale purple blossoms from July until October. It can get quite large, up to four feet tall and wide. There are also several smaller cultivars such as ‘Lacey Blue’ and ‘Little Spire.’ ‘Lacey Blue’ only grows eighteen inches high and wide while ‘Little Spire’ will grow twenty-four to thirty inches high and wide.

For excellent contrast in the landscape, I have used *Perovskia* with yellow-leaved spireas and *Sedum* ‘Angelina.’ For repetition, I have used it with the blue ornamental grass, *Helictotrichon sempervirens*, and *Chrysanthemum pacificum*, a very late blooming mum known more for its white-edged, scalloped foliage than its flowers.

Do not cut Russian Sage back in the fall; leave the stems up during the winter. Do not prune it back in the spring until it is at least the beginning of May to prevent frost damage, and only prune after you see at least three sets of foliated leaves.

If you amend the soil properly, *Perovskia* will give you many years of beauty and low maintenance. 🍃

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