

## THE BLOOM GROOMER

by Geoffrey Coffey

### SAGE ADVICE

**Q:** Last summer I planted some pineapple sage; I was told they were annuals, and should be cut back in winter once they looked like they'd completed their life cycle. It's now the end of February, and although they apparently have stopped growing and look a little rangy, they're still in bloom. I'm reluctant to cut them because they still look good and the hummingbirds like the long, thin, bright-red flowers. Aside from the sprawl factor and a purplish tinge to the leaves, they don't seem past their prime—in fact they look better than some of my perennials. Do you think I should cut them? Was there a window of opportunity that I missed?

**A:** Your plants are *Salvia rutilans*, otherwise known as "Scarlet Pineapple" sage. Contrary to the advice you received, these are perennials, not annuals, with a winter blooming season running from late fall through spring. (In colder climates, the blooming season can be cut off by frost, but this is not a problem in San Francisco.) Along with several other varieties of sage—notably Mexican sage (*Salvia mexicana*) and Velvet sage (*Salvia leucantha*)—these plants are popular additions to the garden precisely because they add color and fragrance during the dark winter months.

With regard to pruning, just remember that *Salvia* is a member of the mint family, which means it grows faster than the proverbial weed—so do not fear the clippers. Certain species of sage can grow up to seven feet tall and ten feet wide in a single season. As for your scarlet pineapples, you can shear off faded flower stems two or three times per season to

encourage new growth; the blooms make delicious additions to fruit salads and cool drinks. A more extensive pruning in late March or early April will give your plants room to grow new stems in the coming fall; cut them back by a third to a half, or even more if you feel particularly savage—they will grow back with a vengeance.



If you are interested in propagating your sage plants, use the aforementioned sprawl to your advantage by ground layering. Select a healthy shoot on the outer edge of the plant, loosen the soil beneath it where the shoot will be buried, and work in a spadeful of compost. Dig a shallow hole or trench in the prepared area. With a sharp knife, make a small cut where the shoot will touch the soil, somewhere around its midpoint; cut about halfway through, starting from the underside, and dust the cut with rooting hormone powder, then insert a pebble or wooden matchstick to hold the cut open. Lay the shoot (the layer) in the hole and fill it in, firming the soil around the layer, with the tip of the shoot poking out on the other side. Some gardeners place a rock or brick on top of the layer to hold

it in place, and tie the layer's tip to a stake to encourage it to grow upward. Keep the layer moist during the growing season. When the new roots have formed (probably after several months; gently dig into the soil to check), cut the new plant free from the parent and dig it up, keeping plenty of soil around the roots, and move it to its intended location. Or you can leave the layer as-is, thus bolstering the mother plant, encouraging outward growth as well as upward.

**MARCH TIPS:** 'tis the season of the Lion and the Lamb, so fertilize your perennials now. If you have an indoor ficus tree, pull it from its pot and clip off the thickest and heaviest root(s), then re-pot with fresh soil and watch it flourish! This is also the time to plant summer bulbs like dahlias and gladiolus.

**APRIL TIPS:** This is prime time for summer preparedness. Plant your herbs and summer annuals (sunflowers and marigolds, for example). Aficionados of the "love-apple" should get their tomatoes in the ground now.



Feeling in the weeds? Send your questions to The Bloom Groomer, ONE 'ZINE SF, 3288 21st Street #245, San Francisco, CA 94110

