

Clary Sage

Annual Clary – *Salvia horminum*

Biennial Clary – *Salvia sclarea*

“The seed of Clarie powdered, finely searced and mixed with honey, taketh away the dimnesse of the eies and cleereth the sight.”

– Gerard

Clary Sage is said to have got its name from the fact that the seeds were used medicinally to clear the eyes – “clear eye” sage – but it may have come from its botanical name, *sclarea*. It is native to southern Europe and was introduced into England about 1562.

Description

Annual clary, *Salvia horminum*, grows easily from seed. It has a basal rosette of small, rounded, pebbly, grey-green leaves from which rises one branching stem. The branches have smaller leaves and many tiny whitish flowers which grow in a spike topped with coloured bracts – pink, purple or sometimes white. In good soil the plants form neat bushes up to 50 cm high and the flowers last quite well, the coloured bracts making the plants attractive until they die in late summer.

Biennial clary, *Salvia sclarea*, is a much larger plant altogether, growing a metre or more high. The leaves are 25-30 cm long, grey, hairy, pebbled, (rather like a bigger foxglove), with a strong fruity scent when crushed. During the second year a square stem develops and a head of blue and white flowers gradually unfurls. The flowers have large pinkish bracts and the whole effect is splendid. The bracts are papery and last long after the flowers have fallen and four large black seeds set in each one.

Two cultivated varieties exist, *Salvia vaticana*, paler coloured and taller; and *Salvia turkestanica*, with pinker flowers and purple-green bracts.

Cultivation

All types of Clary sage are grown from seed which can be sown in seedboxes or directly in the garden in spring. The seed becomes gelatinous and usually germinates in 1-2 weeks. Plants prefer well-drained, limey soil in full sun and readily self-sow from year to year. It is important to give some compost and adequate water to Annual clary during its growth or the plants become undersized and spindly. They should be set about 30 cm apart, but Biennial clary needs to be spaced about 50 cm apart and towards the back of the garden or it smothers smaller plants. If the flowerheads are removed before they set seed, some biennial clary plants last more than two years.



1. *Salvia sclarea* (biennial), 2. *S. horminum* (annual)

Culinary and Household Uses

Salvia sclarea was traditionally used in wine – the flowering tops being steeped in it to give a muscatel flavour – it is sometimes called “muscatel sage” – and was also supposed to make beer “more heady, fit to please drunkards . . .” The leaves can be dipped in batter and fried and leaves and flowers can be added to jellies. An oil distilled from clary is used as a fixative in perfumes.

Medicinal Uses

Clary sage leaves were formerly used for digestive upsets but it was mainly used for eye complaints. The method is clearly set forth by Dr John Hill (1761): “As soon as the seed is put in, the warmth and moistures of the eye operating upon its own substance, cover it with a thick and tough mucilage; as it continues moving in the eye this entangles the little substances which had got in by accident and occasioned the pain, and bring them out with it.”

I have been unable to find any culinary or medicinal use recorded for *Salvia horminum* but grow it for its beauty, and for the bees.
