

GROWING NATIVE SALVIAS from SEED

Many of California's salvia species are plants of the chaparral, and therefore fire-adapted. Seed banks can build up in the soil for years waiting for the right conditions before germinating, which a fire provides. Fire will burn off much of the competing growth, creating bare ground and soil that is now enriched with minerals. The fire also scarifies the seed coat and creates better access to sunlight and warmth for newly-germinated seedlings.

As plant propagators there are several safe ways we can replicate some of these conditions:

1. Use a commercially prepared smoke paper, and pre-soak the seeds with this paper before sowing. (Smoke papers can be purchased at www.seedhunt.com.) I put a section of the paper in a small bowl, add my seeds, and soak it all in warm water for 8 to 12 hours. Then I sow the seed in a container outside.
2. Create your own smoke paper effect by purchasing a commercial 'smoke flavor' product, or by soaking a bit of smoked fish in water, and then using that water to pre-soak the seeds.
3. Use a beekeeper's smoker to pre-treat the seeds.
4. Create a special soil mix for the seed flat by either mixing in, or top-dressing with a charate. Charate can be created by burning stems and leaves to ashes in a controlled situation. Chamise is one of the best plants to use for this.
5. Presoak the seeds in near-boiling water for 8 to 12 hours, drain and sow.
6. Use bottom heat and a grow-light set to about 12 hours to start.

A clay pot is the best container to use when germinating seeds of the species that like really dry conditions, such as White Sage.

Germination occurs in about 4 to 6 weeks, and seedlings are ready to transplant in another two to three months. The cotyledons are tiny wedge-shaped leaves with the straight edges on opposite sides of the stem; and very typical of all mint family plants. Seedlings are susceptible to over-watering, but once they really take hold, they grow fast and will be a mature shrub in about two years.

