

Iâ€™m not a huge fan of all things Russian. I donâ€™t like vodka, borscht or caviar, and I once injured myself attempting â€” under the influence of vodka â€” that impossible Russian Cossack dance where one squats and rapidly extends first one leg and then the other. Body parts snapped that I hardly knew existed. A slow Cajun two-step is more my style. Perhaps Iâ€™m painting with too broad a brush, however. Russians strike me as friendly, generous and hardworking people. And I admire their toughness. Russian winters demand it. And itâ€™s worth noting, plant lovers, that the Russian motherland is home to several cool plant species. I dearly love Perovskia, aka Russian Sage. Itâ€™s a beautiful perennial, grows about 4 feet tall and wide, and covers its long, graceful stems with small, grayish foliage. Its foliage boldly stands out in the garden. In late summer, the gray stems of this botanical Cossack seem to explode overnight with tiny lavender flowers. Crush them and a strong scent of sage is released. Perovskia is a seriously tough and handsome perennial. To survive the harsh environment of its native range, the Ural Mountains of southern Russia and parts of Afghanistan and Tibet, it has, over eons of time, acquired the constitution of a yak. Consequently, Oklahoma weather is no deal-breaker for this late summer flowering perennial. Plant Perovskia in the hottest, sunniest part of the garden. Early fall is an excellent time to plant it. And to prevent it from becoming leggy and sprawling, cut it back to the ground each spring before new growth begins. In mid-May, I prune new growth back by one-half. This produces more stems and doubles the number of flowers later in the summer. Soggy, poorly drained soil is about the only condition this Russian beauty canâ€™t tolerate. Also, Iâ€™ve found that working agricultural lime into the soil makes Perovskia grow and flower with a little more pizzazz. It likes a slightly alkaline soil environment. About one-half pound of lime per 10 square feet, worked into the soil, is about right. Small packages of lime are available at local garden centers. For a great look, plant Perovskias near white flowering perennials

such as Phlox David. The blue and white combination is stunning. During the late summer bloom cycle, my much better half enjoys picking Perovskia's long graceful flower spikes for use in floral arrangements. Perovskia comes in lots of varieties. Longin, Filigran and Blue Mist are hard to beat. Now, if only I could master that Russian squat dance. Featured video: Barry Fugatt is a landscape horticulturist and may be reached by email: barryfugatt@cox.net