

# The winter warmth of flowering hybrid ALOES IN YOUR GARDEN

By J D S SAMPSON



An example of what can be done with aloes in a mass planting. Hillcrest Sports Campus, University of Pretoria

Winter 2006 marked a first in the South African horticultural industry, namely the mass release of a locally bred flowering aloe specially meant for manicured gardens. The well-named 'Hedgehog' was a small neat clumping aloe that ignited a huge amount of interest locally and overseas in these quintessentially 'Proudly (South African) plants.

Interest in waterwise gardening continues to grow in South Africa, particularly in indigenous plants, but hybrid aloes introduce new striking potential for copious colour

(particularly, but not exclusively) in the winter months, when there is often a dearth of flowering.

What makes selected hybrid cultivars special is that they are bred with an eye to a showy garden, they flower more and sooner than 'wild' aloes, have a wider range of colours, grow faster, their form is often more compact, and they are more disease resistant than the vast majority of pure species.

Hybrids are created by plant breeders by transferring the pollen from one plant to the female parts of a flower on another. Parent plants are selected

carefully to have complementary traits such as multiple branches on an inflorescence or small compact growth. Offspring are grown out and only the best are chosen to be reproduced for sale via cuttings or tissue culture. The crossing of species plants often results in a phenomenon called 'hybrid vigour', in which plants exhibit increased growth rate and development owing to greater genetic diversity.

Hybrid plants are not created in a lab as genetically modified organisms, but through plant breeding, a process that humans have been carrying out for

10 000 years or more with their own food crops, and for hundreds of years with ornamentals such as roses.

Only a handful of indigenous Aloe species perform well over the long term in the average garden, while aloe hybrids are meant to relish the care they receive from the garden's owner, including richer soil and more water. They are also much more sustainable as they are mass produced in a nursery. While one can buy species Aloes that have been grown from seed from reputable nurseries, large habitats of *Aloe marlothii* in slowly desiccating ranks are all too depressing sights along roadsides in Johannesburg and Pretoria and at nurseries that should know better. These are seldom collected legally, and require a lot of care to recover and grow well.

Aloe hybrids perform the same ecological function in a garden as species in the wild (feed sunbirds and insects) and stretch the flowering season from March to November in the southern hemisphere, with a succession of cultivars that flower at different times, with occasional re-blooming cultivars outperforming even this amazing nine months of multi-coloured bloom!

They can even be bred for conservation, an example being the magnificent Aloe 'Samson', which is meant to be a garden hardy replacement for the iconic Aloe *dichotoma* or quiver tree.

Aloe hybrids are available in any shape and size, with giant plants



Aloes are sunbird feeding plants. Here seen on Aloe 'Vroegjaar Geel', a plant which flowers for roughly six months of the year, on and off.

flowering gorgeously next to tiny miniatures that should be planted in a pot to be best appreciated.

These flowering aloes are the result of at least 60 years of careful breeding by numerous people, but their efforts are specific to South Africa. Only recently have these plants attracted greater interest overseas, mainly in the USA and Australia, with selected cultivars being licensed for propagation by partner nurseries.

Two aloe breeders maintain 'stables' of amazing plants that are available to the public in South Africa. Sunbird Aloes is owned by Leo Thamm, and De Wet Plant Breeders, owned by Andy de Wet, have an amazing range of

improved *Agapanthus*. Both ranges are available from depots and resellers, including the more commercial garden centres for De Wet products.

Aloe is a genus that talks for itself, particularly in winter, and the inclusion of a few well-chosen hybrids and cultivar plants in an established garden will deepen your experience of the winter months, and provide a buffet table for bees and sunbirds in a time that they may not have many other sources of food.

The trick to getting them to work in a landscape is proper species/cultivar selection and the choice of companion plants. This genus is strongly associated with cycads, succulent plants such as *Agave* and *Crassula*, and indigenous groundcovers and shrubs such as *Agapanthus*, *Dietes* and *Plectranthus*, while appropriate winter-flowering red hot poker (*Kniphofia* sp.), wild dagga (*Leonotis leonurus*) and *Strelitzia reginae* (including the yellow 'Mandela's Gold') round off the lush effect. ■

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Aloe 'Lemon Tea', early flowering and rather different



Mass production of the quiver tree hybrid 'Samson'. Conservation in action as this plant looks the same yet will grow well, so demand for wild collected plants is lessened