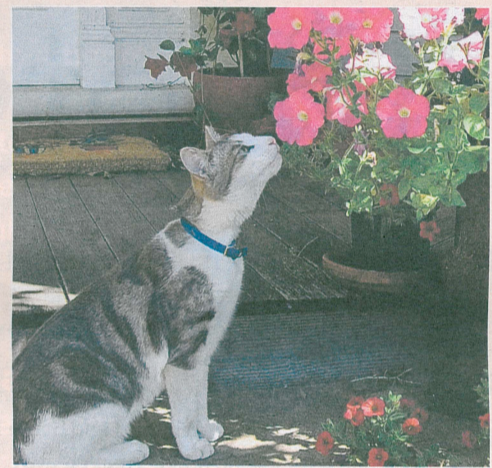


>> on the grapevine



^ kindest cut

Roses appreciate a little tough love this month. If yours is a repeat-flowering rose like this fragrant apricot bloom, Brass Band, prune off all those remaining flowers and buds, plus a few of the end leaves, and, you'll be treated to impressive blooms come autumn. If your rose is a single-flowering variety and the flowering is over, don't hold back. You can prune it now so you won't need to do the job in winter when most are pruned.



^ bloomin' beauts

Few can resist the colour of petunias. But for maximum longevity, maybe flowering right through to the start of winter, they need to be coaxed along with regular deadheading and a monthly treat of liquid fertiliser. Cutting back longer stems will reinvigorate the plant and keep it compact. While regular watering is necessary, resist the urge to over-water.



^ tree care

Drought can decimate trees but creating a dam around them will direct any water to where it's most needed while preventing run-off. Once gardeners might have placed an old car tyre around the trunk but gadgets such as the Greenwell (www.greenwellwatersavers.com), made of recycled, UV-stabilised plastic, are a more modern option, come in various sizes and are much easier to move once the tree matures.

Hello aloe

Introduce colour to the garden through thriving succulents

>> Words & photography
Tony Fawcett

The heat might be on but gardeners shouldn't give up on colour. Despite the dry, there's a smorgasbord of fabulous specimens to brighten up gardens.

Among the most exciting is a new generation of aloes. Likely you know these succulents best through Aloe vera (pictured above), that excellent medicinal plant used to soothe burns and scratches and the like. But aloe has just gone up a gear with the release of some wonderful new South African hybrids just right for dry gardens.

In whites, yellows, pinks, oranges, reds, and even a greenish colour, these aloes flower younger and smaller and up to three or four times more prolifically than the old ones.

"They'll fit anywhere in a garden, in a pot, massed or used as a feature plant," says Joseph Murray of Longwarry wholesale nursery Longview Horticulture, whose own garden features aloes by the dozen.

Best of all, many of these new aloes flower for up to three months and, if chosen carefully, an aloe display can last from February to November.

While many plants take a break over winter, these bird-attracting aloes show their colourful best in the cool. To check them out, see the website of the Queensland company retailing them (www.aloe-aloe.com.au).

The time is also right to lift and break apart magnificent bearded iris to increase stocks. But discard old rhizomes that are likely past it.

And treat yourself to a golden spring display by planting a drift or two of daffodils. Plant in a sunny spot in a site that drains well and they won't disappoint. Many other spring-flowering bulbs can be planted in the next two or three months, too.

If you grew tulips last season and still have those bulbs, now is the time to give them a chill. Place them in your refrigerator crisper for six weeks or so, then plant. They'll be perfectly primed to leap away.

February is generally a relaxing time in the garden, right for doing some planning with a cool drink in the shade. Importantly, keep a watch on plants drying out. A few days of soaring temperatures can bring casualties. An after-dinner inspection is a good routine to ensure the water available to you under Melbourne's 3A water restrictions is getting to the right places.

In the veggie garden there's lots that can go in – beans, beetroot, brussel sprouts, carrots, celery, lettuce, onions, peas, radish, rhubarb and silverbeet. And don't forget some spinach.

FEBRUARY

- 1 Pull back a little mulch to ensure water is actually getting through to where it's needed.
- 2 Keep water up to tomatoes and salad vegetables.
- 3 Top up pot plants with water-storing crystals and wetting agent.
- 4 Cut back hydrangeas after they have finished flowering.

water smart hint

Don't only mulch garden beds. Pot plants will also benefit from mulch during dry conditions.