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ALOES: THE NEW HYBRIDS

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ALOE—ALOE

STORY AND PHOTOS MICHAEL DENT

Historically gardens lovers in Australia have wanted gardens with colour, seasonal change and diversity, but the less-robust herbaceous plants we have used in the past has meant that these plants cry out for shade and irrigation in the midday heat and are no longer the best choice. Aloes are increasingly being used by designers, developers' landscapers and gardeners in Australia because of their environmental sustainability and their reliable performance. The aloe-aloe cultivars take this a step further because of selective breeding to obtain magnificent flowering, allowing us to put colour back in our gardens without the need for irrigation. Over the last 6 months we have launched a range of selectively bred premium hybrid aloes, specifically bred in South Africa for their magnificent flowering qualities. They have been trialled, tested, and propagated across Australia.

We are trying to encourage landscapers and gardeners to treat these cultivars as 'potted colour' and use them as perennials. The aloe-aloe cultivars differ from pure species on the market as their breeding has ensured that flowering is longer, more prolific and the plants are able to flower from a young age. This is a quantum leap in performance, and a wider range of flowering colours is available including pastels and bi-colours.

LANDSCAPE AND GARDEN APPLICATIONS

Aloes can be used in most garden and landscape styles, in modern and traditional landscapes, in both informal and formal settings as feature plants, shrubs, bedding plants or as ground covers. Aloes are virtually indestructible and extremely low maintenance plants. In fact they still look at their best, even with neglect. Traffic islands and nature strips are generally difficult to maintain, so most of the aloe-aloe cultivars - in particular the medium to larger ones - can be used to good effect *en masse* where the climate is hot, dry and unforgiving, as they produce a dramatic display when they all flower simultaneously.

On the other hand plants like *Aloe* 'Fairy Pink' and *A.* 'Topaz' require more protection and moist soils, and perform better when planted with other garden plants. It is important to recognize that aloe-aloe cultivars are 'garden plants' rather than desert plants, and can be used effectively with companion plants such as agapanthus, dietes, dianella, zephyranthes and strelitzias to name a few. Statuesque single stemming cultivars like *A.* 'Saturn' are ideal as a centrepiece in any landscape. Aloes can also be used as vertical planting on green walls, rock walls or retaining walls and provide the landscaper with an additional dimension and increased area for green life. *A.* 'Aries', a trailing aloe, is particularly useful in this application.

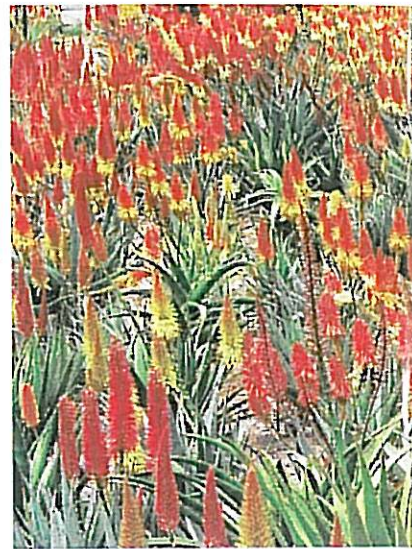
FLOWERING

Aloe-aloe cultivars have been bred predominantly for their prolific, long lasting flowering. They also flower as young plants. The best

characteristics of each species are combined to form a new plant. Certain cultivars such as *A.* 'Always Red', a 2009 release, are capable of flowering for more than 10 months of the year. The flower colours range from white through yellow and orange to red and pink. There are also bicoloured flowers. The timing of the flowering also varies, and cultivars are able to be planted to ensure that there are flowers in the garden at different times for over 12 months of the year. Aloe flowers also attract a variety of birds to the gardens. If the mature hybrid produces a poor flower or none at all then the plant must be inspected for insects, illness, or sun starvation.

ROOTS AND ANCHORAGE

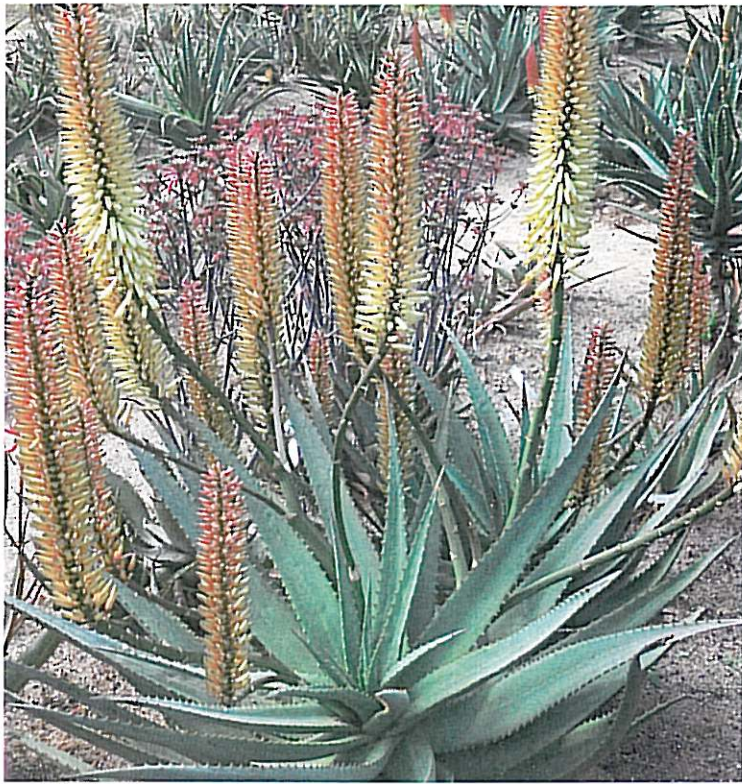
Generally the network of roots of aloes grows a few centimetres below the soil surface allowing the plants to benefit from relatively low amounts of water. They can be planted close to man made structures such as walls without risk of damage (e.g. breaking concrete) as their roots are relatively soft and do not increase in girth with age. This also makes them ideal for container planting and applications like green roofs.



Field of aloe-aloe hybrids. (top)
Aloe 'Always Red'. (above)

PLANTING

Potted plants should be placed in a hole bigger than the pot and we recommend that well rotted organic compost also be added. Aloes can last a long time (more than a month) out of soil and if acquired bare-rooted, it is better to let the roots dry out, and then remove them before planting the aloe hybrids. A newly planted aloe should not be over watered, particularly if planted as a bare-rooted specimen, as a dry plant will make new roots, but a wet plant will not.



SOIL

Aloes can tolerate poor soils with the exception of clayey soils which do not drain well. It is essential that the soil be well drained so as to allow water to pass through the root catchment area so that the aloe can absorb only what water (and nutrients) it needs. Drainage can also be achieved from planting on a slope where the rain water can run off.

If planted in clayey soils a reasonable quantity of river sand should be added, and the hole prepared for planting should contain a mix of soil with generous amounts of sand and organic compost (e.g. well rotted cow manure). It may be necessary to build up a mound of sandy soil above the ground if the soil is extremely clayey.

RAINFALL AND IRRIGATION

Aloes are drought tolerant plants rather than water resistant plants. It is important to understand that aloe-aloe cultivars are not dry land or arid zone plants. Many dry zone plants originate from regions in the world where most rain falls in winter and are unable to handle extremes of heat, humidity and rain in the tropical and subtropical summer. This includes pure species like *Aloe polyphylla* and *Aloe plicatilis* which come from winter rainfall regions and struggle, for example, in the tropical Queensland climate. In fact aloe-aloe cultivars prefer generous watering during their growing season, especially during the warmer months. Care should be taken not to over water. However whilst the aloe-aloe cultivars require some water initially when planted, once the roots are established they are able to cope with deprivation of water for long periods. When the rains come they simply take a big gulp and fill up their roots and leaves enabling them to survive until the next rain. Water can be cut back in the winter months.

TEMPERATURE

Aloes flourish in high temperatures but during the colder months they enter a vegetative or dormant phase. Aloes can tolerate some frost and certain cultivars like A 'Tusker' and A. 'Capricorn' are more frost tolerant than others such as A. 'Fairy Pink' or A. 'Aries'. Aloes are more likely to tolerate frost if kept dry and if grown in well protected areas like against a north facing wall or large rock. If they are exposed to extreme frost, the leaves normally die back from the tips but will recover quickly with the onset of warmer temperatures.

LIGHT INTENSITY

Aloes need bright light for the best flowering, particularly the mature and larger growing cultivars (e.g. A. 'Big Red'). If previously kept in a shady position, they need to be introduced slowly to the sun as they can get sun burnt. When they receive too much light, too suddenly, the leaves stress and turn reddish brown, but usually recover from this stress within months. The cultivar A 'Fairy Pink' copes well in lower light or dappled conditions, and still flowers.

CONTAINER USE

In habitat, aloes often grow on tight rock crevices and are therefore perfectly adapted for container growth. Good drainage is essential and in pots they perform better with regular feeding. It is important that they are not left standing in water.

Aloe Tusker. (top)
 Aloe Capricorn. (middle)
 Aloe Big Red. (above)

FEEDING/FERTILISER

Aloes grow best in free draining soil containing decomposed organic material. Despite being able to tolerate poor soils, aloes are hungry feeders and like rich sandy soils with ample humus and decomposed organic material. Well rotted cow manure is an excellent compost for aloes. If using non organic fertilizer, ensure that the nitrogen levels in the NPK ratio is low relative to the others.

MULCHING

Whilst mulching is useful to suppress weed growth, applying mulch too thickly can adversely prevent rain water from flowing through to the aloe roots. Using pebble is useful in providing a barrier to soil evaporation (like mulch) but also allows rain to flow through the soil.

PESTS

Aloes are relatively pest free in habitat but concentrating them in gardens creates conditions where garden pests can spread to the aloes even though they are no more susceptible to pests than other garden plants. Pests can include scale, aphids, mites, rust, mealy bug and ants. Most of these pests are easily controlled with systemic pesticide or fungicide. The best protection is a healthy plant with good nutrition, soil, water and sufficient light

GROWTH HABIT, LIFE SPAN AND PROPAGATION

Aloe-aloe hybrids have all been vegetatively propagated rather than grown by seed. Seed grown aloe hybrids revert back to inferior parentage and it is only through vegetative cloning that we are able to guarantee the superior hybrid vigour qualities of every plant propagated and sold.

Plants in the aloe-aloe collection range from small dainty aloes to large tree aloes with each cultivar displaying unique behaviour. In general the hybrid aloes are much faster growing than pure species and a plant like Capricorn is able to reach a height of 1 metre within 1 year when planted in the ground under ideal conditions. Certain cultivars are clumping in nature (e.g. A. 'Topaz', 'Fairy Pink', 'Gemini' and 'Aries') which means that side-shoots (suckers) are sometimes produced. These can be removed if apical dominance is preferred, (e.g. A. 'Gemini' looks better as a single



Copper Showers

plant), or retained to allow spreading of the plant. In general the larger growing cultivars (e.g. A. 'Tusker') do not produce side shoots.

Unlike agaves, where the dominant plant dies after flowering, aloes do not die and flowering performance improves significantly in the second, third and subsequent years. The cultivars are unable to be reproduced by seed because seedlings from hybrid aloes never contain the superior characteristics of the hybrid parents and revert back to inferior qualities. These cultivars are long life plants and whilst it is difficult to estimate their lifespan, in habitat certain pure species of aloe have been estimated to be over 200 years old.

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