

NOEL BURDETTE EXPLAINS HOW THE ALOE FAMILY IS A NEW AND SAFE PLANT TO GROW IN THE GARDEN.

As a gardener and avid plant collector, I have been eager to utilise the talents of different plants in the landscape.

This search has often led to disappointment in discovering that some plants just do not live up to their reputation or simply cannot handle the fickle weather patterns in Queensland.

However, a group of plants that has been around for many, many years, yet has managed to become hidden under the radar as far as being a worthy garden species that flourishes in our conditions, is the aloe family.

For many years, we have all become familiar with the common aloe vera that holds strong medicinal properties.

These days, there are many varied cultivars that have been produced through extensive breeding programs in their native South Africa, and bring with them another dimension to the landscape.

Due to their tolerance to high temperatures and low water requirements, landscapers across the country are at long last taking a closer look at the strength that these plants.

This summer, if you are considering a makeover for the garden, why not consider seeking out some of these exotic and beautiful plants to add a dimension of interest that up until now has sadly been lacking in many gardens for those facing tough water restrictions?

One thing that many people often overlook with these plants is that the newer species are primarily grown for their extraordinary flowering ability and not for their mild medicinal properties. From late summer

through to late spring, many of these stunning hybrids will send forth tall flower spikes (often to over one metre) that are a magnet for nectar-feeding birds.

The vertical, candle-like flower spikes last for many weeks as they produce their flowers in succession up the stems. All the while, the plant increases in size and strength to produce even more of a show. Aloes have all too often been labelled as prickly cacti, and although some do carry this reputation well, they are actually members of the succulent tribe and as such, do relish a deep watering at least once a month. They can also handle being grown in light shade, although flowering will be reduced.

One of the best ways to appreciate these plants is to plant them in strong drifts so that their incredibly textured foliage can contrast well with their softer plant neighbours such as agapanthus, grasses, salvias or daisies. This sort of planting strongly emulates their natural appearance.

As succulent as they are, aloes of many species have the uncanny ability to blend effortlessly into many different kinds of garden styles.

The soft flower spikes of many of the smaller species look graceful and fairy-like when interspersed within a cottage-style garden, while some of the larger-growing forms can transform a bland corner of a native garden into a kaleidoscope colour.



Modern-style gardens, too, can be enhanced by using large potted specimens to the fullest effect and even formal gardens open their doors to these plants well, with long avenues being planted out for maximum effect, with little effort.

Aloes of all cultivars enjoy a well-drained soil with a little extra compost added for lush growth and a slow-release organic fertiliser added for that extra boost. Best flowering will always be achieved if they are planted in the full sun and all are able to withstand salt spray and windy conditions well.

In cooler regions, the foliage on many of the aloes will turn delightful hues of red, russet or tan, adding another dimension to their already strong garden appeal.

These days, flowers come in a riot of colours, with the exception of blue or purest white shades, so they can be blended in well for those colour-conscious gardeners. These are wonderful plants to introduce to children as one of their first plants, and can be safely planted in and around play areas.

These holidays, be on the lookout for this new generation of exciting plants to add to your garden, and know that gardening and water restrictions can coexist in harmony, and surprisingly bring bountiful colour and charm to your garden.

With warm wishes for a happy Christmas and a new year full of abundant beauty.

