

May 23 2020

We often forego the soul of individual plants and replace it with physical attributes and stylishness we seek.

We admire its structure, flower colour, form and its contribution to the overall design but somehow forget it's a living thing that interacts with all organisms both above and below the soil.

Should we not be putting all in perspective and see their true character and value.... not just how they look.

Whilst judging a garden many years ago my esteemed colleague and fellow judge commented that the garden in question needed structure and lacked form and discipline.... He felt we could not relate to it.

Well once I had picked myself up and dusted off, I responded by saying that the garden was perfectly natural, probably needed to be a bit wilder and could lose some of the many ornamental landscape features.

He didn't understand when I gave the garden a good score!!

We were seeing the garden from two totally opposite sides.

Him as a designer and I as a plantsman relating to nature!!

He judged it from the human eye whilst I was judging it from nature's eye.

I appreciated the local content suited to the climate, water efficiency, bird life, low maintenance and general harmony with the surrounds.

I truly believe that comes first in any garden!!

In this regard I thought I could mention a rather, informal and practical plant we could use a bit more in the garden.

It's not uncommon but I think it is easily overlooked because it is somewhat plain looking and doesn't have big showy flowers.

Buddleja auriculata known as the Weeping Sage Bush is not local or fynbos and hails from the cooler areas of Natal and Eastern Cape.

Well you might say...how does it survive here?

I have seen many in our gardens, all thriving, especially those that have good loamy soils as it's not one for sandy dry conditions.

It can handle extreme cold but not too keen on wet feet.

The leaves are eye catching with dark green above and a silvery grey on the underside, giving a sparkling effect when there is a slight breeze.

The creamy orange to pink flowers are highly scented like most *Buddleja*'s and attract a host of butterflies and other insects which in turn brings birds like the Southern Bou bou, Cape Robin and other insect eaters.

Furthermore, the plant acts as a larval host to butterflies which provides even more bird food.

This plant can act as a small tree if pruned up and is an excellent screener but I have seen them as perfect hedges.

They have a long flowering period from around mid-winter right into spring and usually don't get beyond 3-4m in height so are suited to small and medium sized gardens as well.

They do well under most conditions but a good composted planting mix will go a long way.

If they get a big leggy after a few years and you need to improve screening capabilities then prune back 1/3 to encourage new growth, otherwise just leave it to look after itself the natural way.

It will require minimal but regular water in summer and is happy with our winter rains as long as the soil is fairly well drained.

The weeping sage can be propagated easily from hardwood cutting and makes for a really attractive informal hedge when mixed with other shrubs.

It grows well in semi shade during the hot summer months!!

Another good hardy widespread local you can plant anywhere in a wild garden is the Crossberry- *Grewia occidentalis*.

It is a common local shrub or small tree found in many parts of the country.

The pink to mauve star like flowers usually appear in summer but there always seems to be some around throughout the year.

They are normally multi stemmed and get to an average height of 3m but can get bigger depending on position and soil conditions.

Some say they are straggly bushes...I say interesting and adaptable!

The segmented berry is relished by fruit eating birds and the plant is also used by butterflies as a larval host.

They don't require excessive water and do well in semi shade to full sun, but as usual a key factor in keeping this plant happy is to mulch throughout the year.

I have seen great specimens growing in varied habitats from the dry Karoo to forest and harsh coastal conditions.

Make a note then... of *Grewia occidentalis*..the Crossberry when you next go shopping.

In the meantime May is the curtain raiser to many flowering plants especially protea family, so keep an open on your walks for the King Protea – *Protea cynaroides*, the Green Sugarbush- *Protea coronata*, and my favourite.. the Common Sugarbush- *Protea repens*... which I consider to be the easiest and most adaptable protea of all.

May May bring you much joy and fun in your wild garden...

