

January 30

Good morning and a quick start to the day, with an answer to a question I was asked this week.

The question, how does one propagate aloes?

Firstly, aloes are many and varied with about 500 species worldwide, of which about 125 are found in South Africa and 25 species growing in fynbos.

These figures might be a bit out as many new species have been described of late.

No matter how many there are, rather how do we increase what we have.

All species can be grown from seed with a few difficult ones here and there but generally easy to germinate.

Many of the bushier specimens, including the trailing, climbing, suckering and clump forming, can be propagated by cuttings, off shoots and division.

When you propagate by vegetative means you land up with an instant clone of the parent, so you don't have to wait too long for flowers, in most cases!

Although this is a quick method, it is better to sow seed if you are looking for genetic diversity and of course large quantities for commercial use.

Keen gardeners, nurserymen and horticulturist always get excited when doing cuttings especially when the mother plant has a rich history or some sentimental attachment.

Sometimes we cant hold back and must pinch a cutting, especially when it is leaning over a wall and just asking for it!!

Some might be surprised to know that most ornamentals are grown from cuttings! Lets get back to aloes.....

If you decide to take a cutting or remove an off shoot, the key to success is to let them dry out for about a week or more in a cool dry spot.

This prevents stem rot when you plant them.

I was once given a cutting of a very special Aloe arborescens hybrid when I started my first garden. It was a natural hybrid with huge red flowers about twice the size of the average species.

I put it in a cool spot to dry out a bit and forgot all about it but eventually planted it out about 6 weeks later.

Today it stands nearly 6ft tall and is a talking point when in flower!

I do suggest that they are planted in a sandy mix even if you must fill the hole with clean coarse sand.

Most aloes are quite top heavy so prop it up with a few small stakes to keep it secure, especially if you are in a windy area.

Keep in mind that most aloes flower from mid-winter to spring, so get them into the ground soon and enjoy the winter flowers.

My favourite aloes in the wild garden are the rambling types.

They are so rewarding as they climb trees, get on and into fences, shrubs and push up against any barrier in their path.

There are a few species, all easy to propagate and range in colour from red, yellow and some with bicoloured flowers.

Our very own local rambling aloe, *Aloe commixta*, is found right here on the Peninsula and does very well in local gardens.

There are of course many aloe-like plants that complement the garden.

Red hot Pokers and *Bulbinella* are two examples that grow easily and add colour in winter and summer.

Right now, with temperatures reaching into the late 30's there is still a lot in flower, proving that no matter the season, there is always something in flower! For me it is the perennial Basil, Lavender, Cotyledons, Ivy leafed Pelargonium and a few Mesems that never give up even though they get no attention besides a bit of water now and again.

It is only a matter of time before the many Autumn bulbs begin to flower.

It usually starts off with the March Lily, *Amaryllis belladonna* and is closely followed by the stunning Chandelier Lily- *Brunsvigia* and then followed by the more delicate Nerines.

As we enter February, usually our hottest month, we tend to get over concerned about watering.

Many plants start drooping in the midday heat and we take this as a sign of not enough moisture in the soil!

You will find that most seem to recuperate miraculously in the evening, a sign that they probably don't need water.

It is also possible that the plant is in the wrong position and needs more shade. Under these circumstances, mulch plays a pivotal role in both soil quality and plant health!

In hot weather it not only reduces evaporation but keeps the soil and roots cool.

This can be enhanced by covering bare patches not only with mulch but suitable hardy groundcovers.

Right now the African Pied Barbet is peh, peh, pehping away so I gather its time to get out there and enjoy the garden before it gets too hot.

Goodbye from me and I look forward to chatting again next week, as February is a short month and we have less time to get out there!!