

Simply Indigenous - ARTICLES

1. *By the light of the silvery moon. Grey foliage indigenous plants - SA Gardening Oct*

The soft powdery greys, blue greys and silver metallics are some of the most versatile, waterwise and showy of all foliage plants. Indigenous genera boast a multitude of species that can be used in veld gardens, rockeries, mixed borders, containers and even the edge of woodland gardens. Most grey foliage plants thrive in hot, dry climates and many do well where little else wants to grow. For some like the bloubos, *Petalidium oblongifolium*, the harsher the conditions, the more beautiful the metallic leaves and the more prolific the flowering! From the tough, mat-forming succulent groundcovers such as *Othonna carnosa* and the almost purple grey *Senecio radicans* to the regal spikes of *Strelitzia juncea* and the ever-popular highveld cabbage tree, *Cussonia paniculata*, the greys have their place in the 'wildest of gardens' and the most structured of corporate landscapes.

As the full moon dances across the cloudless night sky, the silvery grey garden is most graceful but dramatic effects are also created as the glistening dew shimmers on the silvery leaves in the early morning light and in the hot, dry, midday sun the greys truly come into their own.

Soft Powdery Greys

The *Helichrysum* or kooigoed family is one of the most easily recognizable. The foliage is at times almost white. One of the neatest and most versatile is a *helichrysum* that we have called 'mustard' due to the showy round mustard-coloured flowers in mid-summer. This is an absolute winner as it remains tight and neat even though it spreads 3m+. *Helichrysum crispum* and *petiolare* are shrubby and ideal for embankments and large beds. *Chrysanthemoides incana* is a wonderful low creeping shrublet for retaining walls. *Gazania rigens uniflora* is another almost powdery white foliage plant for mixed borders and rockeries. It does not do well in clay soil though. *Arctotis stoechadifolia* is a mat-forming groundcover for embankments, mixed borders and rockeries.

Shimmering Silvers

Eumorphia prostrata, a high altitude, Drakensberg Alpine endemic is an aromatic small shrublet or groundcover with the most intriguing shimmering gunmetal silver leaves which are small and narrow. It is so well suited to frosty highveld gardens. The flowers are small white with a yellow centre, daisy-like, in summer.

Matted Greys

The matted grey green variety of *Mundulea sericea*, the corkbush is one of the most beautiful focal shrubs in any garden. The flowers are lilac mauve but even when not in flower, the leaves are dazzling. *Pelargonium reniforme* and *sidoides* are not only popular flowering subjects for the toughest of conditions but their foliage is almost kidney-shape and interesting. The wild sage family is filled with matted aromatic greys. They are versatile, tough and can easily be shaped. From the blue white flowers of *Salvia dolomitica* to the caramel browns of *Salvia Africana-lutea* and even the rosy reds of *Salvia lanceolata*, they are a wonderful addition to any scented garden or patio display.

Subtle Undertones

Some plants have beautiful 'bi-coloured leaves', ie contrasting upper and lower surfaces such as some of the *Gazanias*, *Brachylaena discolor* (Coastal or silver oak) *Buddleja saligna* (false olive), *Buddleja salvifolia* (sagewood) and *Tarchonanthus camphoratus* (camphor bush). The latter three can be used as frost hardy backdrops to large beds. *Helichrysum populifolium* is a true beauty with large cobweb grey leaves above and white felted beneath. It is striking in dappled shade. Succulent sentinels

Aloes and succulents provide us with some of the most striking grey foliage of all, from the cotyledons with their round to finger-like pointy leaves to the focal fan aloes. Cotyledons are

good container subjects for wide rimmed stone or dark tone pots. In rockeries, they can either be mass planted or used inbetween crevices. They are very eye-catching as a focal feature in a paved bed. Their flowers attracts sunbirds and they deserve to play a more prominent role in our waterwise gardens, they are more deserving than their common name 'plakkie'. *Cotyledon orbiculata* subsp. *flanaganii* and *barbeyi* form neat shrublets providing winter colour. *Kalanchoe thyrsiflora* has striking, tall, matted grey stems, the flowers are tubed grey green and the leaves are grayish tinged red. It is one of the most striking of all indigenous plants. There are numerous, wonderful, winter flowering, grey leaf aloes including *chabaudii*, *striata*, *marlotthi*, *castanea* and *globuligemma* which always create a stir whether mass planted in rockeries, veld gardens or as individual showpieces in natural stone containers.

Blue moon

For those gardeners who find the very pale, soft greys 'too pale' to use in conventional seas of green, the blue greys are more adaptable to a broader spectrum of garden themes. *Geranium incanum* (carpet geranium), *Geranium* sp. *Drakensberg*, *Euryops pectinatus* (daisy bush), *Melinis nerviglumis* and *Melianthus major* (Giant honeyflower) are the most versatile. *Geranium* sp. *Drakensberg* is quite amazing. It thrives in full sun but will happily tolerate morning shade, the leaves are soft, fine, divided and the flowers mauve. It covers a wide area 3-5m+ and is quite dazzling in its growth habit. *Melinis nerviglumis* is a beautiful grass with wispy burgundy plumes. The Giant honeyflower has large serrated, dramatic leaves and large showy deep burgundy flowers which attract many sunbirds, it is a wonderful focal plant in any style of garden and even complements tropical garden themes very well.

Companion Planting

Blue grey, matted velvety dull green and coppery tones complement silvery grey foliage plants very well. (*Transvaal gardenia*), *Metarungia longistrobis* (sunbird bush), *Dombeya rotundifolia* (wild pear) and the *Buddlejas* all provide a perfect backdrop. The contrasting coppery foliage of *Myrsine Africana* (cape myrtle), *Heteropyxis natalensis* (Lavender tree), *Halleria eliptica* (small wild fuchsia), *Diospyros whyteana* (bladdernut) and aloes such as *greatheadii* and *microstigma* all work very well with our silvery greys. Large, glossy green foliage associated with tropical theme gardens do not do very well with the greys. The complementing tones need to either be very cool ie blue or very dull green particularly when using the very pale powdery greys or a warm contrast of brownish, golden yellow and copper against more subtle greys. There are a few spectacular grey leaf bulbous plants such as *Boophone disticha*, *Ammocharis coranica* and *Brunsvigia littoralis* which also have striking leaf shape and form and are desirable companion plants for mat-forming grey groundcovers.

Planting Notes:

- Always take the water requirements of the respective species into consideration when selecting your companion plants. Fortunately most grey foliage species and the companion plants listed are waterwise. In the summer rainfall regions, water once a week if summer rains are poor and once every two weeks in winter. For winter rainfall regions, water once a week in summer and once or twice a week if winter rains are low.
- Most grey foliage plants require very well drained soil.
- Woolly aphids can be a problem on *helichrysums*, and white scale and woolly aphids on the roots, stems and growing tips on aloes and succulents, treat with chlorpyrifos.
- Grey foliage all need full sun to keep their striking grey colour
- Most grey foliage plants attract butterflies, *cotyledons* and aloes attract sunbirds

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