

## Creative Designs with Aloes:

**“People will stare. Make it worth their while”, proclaimed award-winning marketing expert, Sally Hogshead, to advertise a famous jewellery brand. They just as easily praise our South African jewels, the show-stopping aloes that fire up the winter landscape with flames of orange, red and yellow. Always dramatic, this genus produces no luke-warm feelings amongst gardeners; they either love ‘em or hate ‘em. But, it is often during these most stressful of times that their value is best appreciated.**

And a winter garden without an Aloe is like a wardrobe without that little black dress! Or a smart pair of jeans?

Our winter days are thus the best time to explore the versatility of our beautiful aloes, to introduce them to new styles and partners. Most species begin flowering from May onwards when changing leaf colours, from greens to russet and red, encourage new combination ideas. Excite your creativity and play around with texture, form, light and outrageous combinations - whatever takes your fancy and answers the question, “Why not?”

### Sharp spikes and soft clouds

In this little cameo, billowing clouds of *Crassula sarmentosa* – green, russet, pink and white – gently hug the spiny, pointed leaves of individual *Aloe chabaudii*. This *Crassula* is so easy to grow and works well in this dry, sunny bed where growth is more compact and colourful. Control its spread by pinching off any limbs that stray too far and replant elsewhere in the garden where they should quickly root. From June through to August *Aloe chabaudii* shoot plump orange arrowheads above the blue-grey leaves; this is one of the neatest and prettiest aloes for the garden. While *A. chabaudii* copes with damper soils better than other family members, this gorgeous combination handles an average drought and will survive light frost.

### Kalanchoes make beautiful Aloe companions

Many aloes enjoy short durations of light shade, a respite from the scorching sun, and *Erythrina lysistemon* (Common Coral Tree) is a perfect companion to give a dappled summer shade that lets in the winter sun. The rare and Vulnerable (SANBI National Red List category) *Kalanchoe longiflora* (Tugela cliff-kalanchoe, or long-flower kalanchoe), makes a striking picture in mosaics of jade and apple greens and acid yellow flowers in autumn and winter. This groundcover combines beautifully with any aloe species. Stems are unusually quadrangular rather than round, and the leaves are most attractive, with a rounded tip that is bluntly serrated. Acid yellow tubular flowers have four petals at the tips of the tube, striking in full bloom in autumn and winter. Plants send out long stems through the season with leaves and flowers clambering over each other and neighbouring plants. So it can look somewhat untidy as the flowering season comes to an end, but this is easy to control; at the end of winter give the plants a light haircut. This little-known member of the *Kalanchoe* family hails from the Tugela Ferry/ Muden area of KZN. It is a cremnohyte or cliff dweller, so is a perfect plant to grow in containers, rock gardens and retaining walls in both full sun and semi-shade. I’d like to see them experimented with in the shallow soils of roof gardens and vertical

walls. Here, they create a gleaming display are *Aloe ferox*, *A. vanbalenii* and *A. arborescens*, the best choices for gardens along the KZN South Coast. Other single-stemmed species that would work just as well are *A. africana*, *A. marlothii*, *A. rupestris*; stemless aloes to try are *A. aculeata*, *A. luteceus*, and *A. cryptopoda*. Adding contrasting texture and form are *K. longiflora*'s sister-plant, *Kalanchoe thyrsiflora* (White Lady), and the large, dark green leaves of *Strelitzia reginae*.

### **Aloe chabaudii and the Tongan Pelargonium**

The relaxed growth of *Pelargonium tongaense* surrounding the static aloe forms makes for an intriguing combination and looks good even out of aloe season. As the *Pelargonium* has an extended flowering season, it will overlap with most of the aloe species you choose, adding to the attractive contrast between the plants. In this display, *Aloe chabaudii* is about to pop open its bright orange flowers for a charming winter picture. In fact, *A. chabaudii*'s neat shape suits many arrangements, large or small; here, they front a clay pot whose edges overflow with the cylindrical grey leaves and magenta/ purple flowers of one of the *Lampranthus* species. Placed on a flat tree trunk platform raises the flowers to the same height as those of the aloe, and the result is dramatic. Being pot-bound also helps to control the strong growth of the vygie; any wayward stems are easily pruned.

### **Aloe vanbalenii and *Crassula ovata*:**

As contradictory as this may seem, the low winter light gives life to this arrangement. At the feet of dark grey, rough-textured trunks, the peach-yellow flowers of the Aloe echo the copper and orange shade that wash otherwise bright green, leaves. In the foreground, *Aloe maculata* flowers are just opening, and off to the one side, cotton wool balls of pink and white flowers cover the neat shape of this gorgeous *Crassula*. At this time, the common name Pink Joy suits it far more than the more oft used 'Kerky'.

### **Aloe arborescens**

The Krantz Aloe is so stunning it deserves to stand alone. The driest of winters brings out a red so intense it is blinding, beautifully set off by the blue-grey leaves! Do not be tempted to water your plant for fear of stress - it will richly reward you with a display like this, offering nectar for birds and insects from miles around. It forms a neat hedge or screen and is perfect for gardens from small to large. To keep a neat shape, cut off any wayward stems, allow to form a protective skin and plant the cut-off section close to the old stem. This species is water-wise and frost hardy.

### **A touch of elegance**

For fans of the uncluttered look, this neat-as-a-pin entrance garden will inspire you. The secret is in the choice of plant material – aside from the pruning of the various flower heads, this arrangement is maintenance free. Rocks sourced from the site create the focal point, with grey-leaved aloes of varying heights tucked in behind them - *Aloe arborescens*, *Aloe chabaudii*, *A. ferox* and *A. thraskii* have orange and yellow flower spikes that bloom through winter. Long spiral limbs of *A. vanbalenii* wrap around the rocks, green and copper, with

golden yellow inflorescences at the tips of long, slender stems. *Crassula multicava*, one of the neatest and hardiest of groundcovers, knits the individual pieces together, thriving through extreme weather, in sun and shade without ever outgrowing its space. *Kleinia fulgens* has self-seeded, popping up in between the spread of *Crassula*. At the top of this gently slope, maroon-red leaves of *Kalanchoe sexangularis* encircle a still-young *Strelitzia reginae*. The foliage backdrop brings seasonal interest in the form of the Wild Dagga, *Leonotis leonurus*, which requires pruning as winter draws to a close, and the small Wild-Pride-of-India tree, *Galpinia transvaalica*. A large log from a tree felled on site grounds the design with its weight and size. (Elsa Pooley designs)