

Popularization of Indigenous Plants

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The majority of South Africans are “locked into” a European style of gardening and make use of plants that do not occur naturally in the region. The use of indigenous plants has several advantages, of which drought resistance is the most important. Because many indigenous plants are less attractive than the popular exotic plant, a special marketing approach is necessary to change the attitude of gardeners. An approach, which appears to be successful, is to promote the idea of gardening for wild life, not indigenous plants. Once a gardener has learned which plants attract birds, butterflies, and small animals it becomes natural to plant indigenous plants.

INTRODUCTION

The majority of South Africans are locked in to a Eurocentric style of gardening and make use of plant taxa that do not naturally occur in the region. This style of gardening was introduced into the country decades ago as a result of the early colonization of South Africa by the English and Dutch. Written articles, video, and film material as well as horticultural training curricula, have ensured that this gardening mentality remains entrenched and that use of indigenous material has in the past been limited to a few “nature freaks”.

With the awakening of environmental awareness among the general public during the past decade, gardening with indigenous plants has become fashionable and an increase in sales has been realized by some wholesale growers and retailers alike. Gardeners are becoming more aware of an ‘African’ approach to garden design.

Many native or indigenous species of plants in containers lack the visual impact of exotic best sellers like *Abelia xgrandiflora* ‘Francis Mason’, *Euomyrus taxa*, *Hebe* cultivars, and the host of new introductions which are brought to our shores each year. A very different method of marketing indigenous plants is needed to compete in a market which favors exotic cultivars. The following advantages in the use of indigenous plants need to be highlighted:

- South Africa is a country with a climate of continuous drought, and the odd wet season. Indigenous plants are often more drought resistant than their exotic counterparts which may originate from countries with high rainfall. Indigenous plants are more adapted to South African climatic conditions, this is especially true if the plants actually occur naturally in the area of planting.
- Indigenous plants will in many cases, attract more birds and “urban wildlife” than exotic plants. Local insects are more adapted to the natural plants, e.g., butterflies mainly use indigenous plants as host plants. The South African public is very aware of conservation and this fact can be used to influence their gardening style in favor of “urban conservation”.

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