

DESIGNING WITH PLECTRANTHUS

Arguably the showstoppers of the shade, the *Plectranthus* species are at their best in April, their gorgeous colours making them favourites with gardeners around the world. The genus is grown extensively in mainly frost-free gardens and gardeners are always on the lookout for fresh combination ideas.

The summer-flowering *Plectranthus* begin their growth cycle in spring, reach their flowering peak in Autumn before fading into their dormant winter season, which is also the best time to prune them to ensure healthy growth and flowers the following year. These forest lovers respond well to natural foods, like leaf mulch and compost. The species mentioned here will do well in KZN, on the Mpumalanga escarpment, in the cooler, damper areas of the Western Cape, and along the Garden Route. They do handle a mild frost but give them protection under the dense cover of evergreen trees. Cut frost damaged plants back once all chance of frost is over, and they will soon leaf again as the temperatures warm up.

***Plectranthus ecklonii* and *Duvernoia adhatodoides*.**

Plectranthus ecklonii: shade; mild frost.

Duvernoia adhatodoides: shade; mild-moderate frost.

Two beautiful shrubs to colour the autumn shade are the Pistol Bush and the pink form of Eklon's Spurflower. Both are understory and forest margin shrubs blooming well in light to full shade although the Pistol Bush appears to flower better when it receives a little morning sun. The large, dark green, shade-adapted leaves of the *Duvernoia* offer the perfect backdrop for the soft pink flowers and bright green leaves of Ecklon's Spurflower. The height of the Pistol Bush is quite variable, usually tall with a single bare stem in full shade, but shorter with dense foliage and multiple stems in the brighter light on the edge of a shady bed, forest or woodland. Flowering takes place in summer, with large and white with pink to mauve markings, held in erect sprays from the stems. These are pollinated by the carpenter bees and are visited by many nectar feeders. The shrub outside my bedroom window is busy with little sunbirds during this season. As flowering ends, club-shaped seed capsules form; these split open when dry, the sound likened to a pistol shot, scattering seed over a large area.

The 1.5 m high *Plectranthus ecklonii* provides leaf from ground level, and here, the pale pink flowers meet the low-hanging branches of the Pistol Bush, highlighting the pink-mauve markings inside the *Duvernoia* flowers. This Spurflower is a favourite shade shrub in coastal gardens but also occurs throughout much of the country. The Large-leaved Spurflower grows best used in light to dark shade situations but adapt well to areas of morning sun if they begin their growing life there. The soft-wooded perennials require pruning in the absence of the typical forest browsers, best done in late winter or early spring in frosty areas. The shrub's soft wood is vulnerable to sucking insects like Mealybug and Scale, especially in moist, shaded conditions with too-little air circulation. Young, healthy shoots cope best with pests and diseases, so prune older growth to encourage vigorous new shoots.

Plectranthus fruticosus 'James' and Psychotria capensis:

This shrubby combo is alive with birds and butterflies throughout autumn. The lemon-yellow *Psychotria* flowers are mostly over now, but there are often a few strays to join the fruit clusters through autumn. The bright green berries change to yellow and finally red through the ripening process and feed a variety of birds from the Western Cape up towards Mozambique and Zimbabwe. The Bird-berry is that perfect shrub; neat, low-maintenance, colourful flowers, fast-growing, and thrives in both sun and shade. Plus, and it's a big plus, the nectar and fruit provide insects and bird food! The only drawback for inland gardeners is its sensitivity to frost. 'James' is a lovely *P. fruticosus* cultivar, with soft, pale pink flowers and dark green leaves with maroon veins and a prominent midrib. Even out of flower this neat, evergreen combination is pleasing. 'James' will cope with full sun if necessary, but I find the pale pink flowers show up best in the shade. Other partners for 'James' are the white flowering dombeyas; try *D. cymosa* or *D. tiliacea*. These are autumn-flowering shrubs to small trees in mixed shrub and forest margin habitats. Both species attract day-flying moths and bees.

Plectranthus ambiguus in the shade of Apodytes dimidiata:

Plectranthus ambiguus is not as common in gardens as its siblings yet this knee-high shrub boasts the most spectacular flowers of the genus. Flowering displays are outstanding with large, fluffy purple sprays standing above the leaves often so dense the leaves are hidden from view. This variety is a South African endemic, encountered in the understory of Eastern Cape forests up into northern KZN. Those growing in the northern-most reaches of the distribution range are usually taller than their southern counterparts. In this arrangement the purple sprays show up the brilliance of the grey/white trunk of the Wild Pear; the white flowers of *Plectranthus ciliatus* would be a beautiful addition as an edging border.

Coastal Combo: Allophylus dregeanus and Plectranthus ciliatus 'Drège'.

The One-leaf *Allophylus* is one of the prettiest small understory trees in Eastern Cape and KZN forests and is a South African endemic. The height of this typically multi-stemmed tree varies from 2 up to 6 m, often shorter in urban gardens than it is in the wild. Shiny, dark green leaves have a prominent mid-rib and attractive bluntly toothed margins. Tiny flowers hang in multiple sprays throughout summer, white and sweetly fragrant. Small red fleshy fruits make this an important understory tree; these ripen in sequence up to the fruiting spike and attract a wide variety of birds. In *Gardening with Indigenous Shrubs* by David and Sally Johnson, and Geoff Nichols (now out of print), they suggest this plant does not fruit outside its natural range. *Allophylus dregeanus* is the host plant of the beautiful *Charaxes avanes* butterfly. Plant in gardens where summer rains are plentiful and the climate is warm. Trees will survive a light frost, but I'd recommend planting them in the shelter of large evergreen trees that will offer some protection against the cold. The multiple pale stems contrast well with dark-leaved groundcovers like *Plectranthus ciliatus* 'Drège'. This prolific low-growing groundcover puts on a long display of white flowers – with a touch of pink - from March through to May. Leaves have a characteristic purple vein and dark purple undersides. Give a light trim in spring and keep well fed with leaf mulch and home-made compost through the year. This little Plec copes with mild frost; frost-damaged plants will produce new growth in the spring rains and warming temperatures.

Plectranthus zuluensis, Plectranthus ciliatus hybrid, and Ledebouria petiolata

The neat Zulu Spurflower loves the conditions beneath a mature Pigeonwood in this bed, providing eye-catching flower colour for much of the year. It is a gorgeous combination of blue-purple flowers and bright to dark green leaves, and here we've added a puddle of lime green *Plectranthus ciliatus* 'Shasha' as a luminous ground-level skirt. The odd low-hanging branch of the Plec needs trimming to improve light levels for 'Shasha', although variegations are usually more pronounced in a darker shade. The Trema canopy is loose and open allowing in frequent beams of direct sun throughout the day. It is easy to see why 'Shasha' is a sought-after plant shady beds for the speckled lime and dark green foliage is eye-catching. Little White Soldiers, *Ledebouria petiolata*, previously *Drimiopsis maculata*, help to fill the layer between shrub and groundcover with their glossy, heart-shaped leaves and spots of purple-brown. Clump size is quite compact and seldom spreads more than 30 cm in diameter. Small scented white to pale green flowers stand to attention above the leaves from August through to March attracting a variety of pollinators, including honey bees. This *Ledebouria* is half-hardy, avoiding the stress of a frosty winter by dropping its leaves and tucking up warmly beneath the soil. The Plectranthus, though, is a sub-tropical species and is sensitive to frost.

Add pink and mauve Plecs to your shady bower

Add colour to your shady bower with a mix of flowering Plecs. Screen off your sanctuary from busy home life with groups of white and purple *P. ecklonii*, the smaller *P. fruticosus* and *P. saccatus* (white and blue). Edge the seating area in the white flowering groundcover, *P. ciliatus*. Drop in some large, tropical Arum leaves, and you have a cool, calm nook in which to while away the hours unseen!

Plectranthus neochilus with Euryops pectinatus or white-flowering Scabiosa

Gardeners with plenty of sun and winter frost can try this bright pairing of the Golden Daisy Bush and the blue/mauve lobster-like flowers of *Plectranthus neochilus*. The Plec thrives in arid, inhospitable verges, on exposed, rocky ground and dry gardens. Both species revel in the warm sun but won't refuse a little afternoon shade, and adapt to both dry and moderately moist soils. The Daisy Bush's flowering season - spring and early summer with intermittent daisies through the year - coincides with that of the Spurflower whose bloom time then continues through summer and into autumn. Trim the Golden Daisy Bush through the year to encourage it to leaf low down where the bright yellow daisies can mingle with the Plec's purple-blue spikes. A light trim after flowering encourages fresh leaf growth.

Or try a wildflower meadow design. Plant the Lobster Flower front of bed with a generous spread of white-flowering *Scabiosa incisa* (or a hybrid variety) behind. Flowers perch on tall, slender stems above attractive blue-grey feathery foliage. Flowers sway in the gentlest of breezes and from spring to summer a variety of butterflies will visit their favourite nectar flowers. Plants can become woody; prune them back to encourage new growth. These are beautiful combinations for sandy soils in full sun, and all three species are hardy and water wise.

Plectranthus ciliatus bank

Looking to replace struggling lawn on a shady bank? *Plectranthus ciliatus* performs beautifully, providing neat, textured leaves through the year, and spikes of white flowers from February to June, with a peak in April. This groundcover is also effective as a neat, low-maintenance edging alongside steps and pathways. A light after-flower prune will ensure compact growth and dense foliage cover. The Eyelash Spur flower thrives in frost-free gardens with good rains, and in dappled, light to full shade. Plants respond beautifully to generous layers of mulch.