

Syncolostemon Family – An Autumn Spectacle.

We're stretching the patience of gardeners this month with three difficult to source autumn-flowering species from the same family. They're known to be challenging to propagate, hence their rarity in local nurseries. But, they are out there, if you're up for the challenge.

These autumn-flowering *Syncolostemon* shrubs are some of the most beautiful and aromatic shrubs as equally at home in a wildlife design as they are in a more formal landscape. They are difficult to source but are worth the effort! Different species originate from various parts of the country:

S. transvaalensis, (= *Hemizygia transvaalensis*), from the Highveld area, *S. canescens* from Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, and North West, *S. rotundifolius* from the Southern KZN and Eastern Cape regions, and *S. densiflorous*, found along the KZN coast and up into the Midlands. Flowering times range from spring to winter.

Syncolostemon rotundifolius

Rounded-leaf Sagebush, or Round-leaved Pink Plume

This gorgeous pink shrub dominates the lower section of my garden every April where it thrives despite outright neglect since being planted out 8 years ago. Flowering season covers November to July, with its main flush in February to May. Currently heavy with bloom, the small leaves are hidden from view by the sheer abundance of pale pink flowers. These round-tipped greenish grey leaves and multiple branches add to its attractiveness and effectiveness as a screen for most of the year until pruning back at the end of winter.

The Rounded-leaf Sagebush is a Pondoland endemic an area that stretches from the Oribi Flats in southern KZN to around Port St. John's in the Eastern Cape where it grows in coastal grassland on rocky slopes, often near forest margins. Here, temperatures rarely very low, and rainfall, while mostly in the summer months, can fall off and on throughout the year.

Conditions: full sun and well-drained soils with at least moderate rainfall should suit the Round-leaved Pink Plume and plants will struggle if soils become too dry.

Plants grow 1.8 m high in full sun. In my garden though, it grows on the edge of a tree canopy and so receives some morning and late afternoon sun, and the shrub is around 2.2 m high.

Syncolostemon rotundifolius prefers little disturbance around the roots and main stem, and perhaps one reason for its reputed difficulty in cultivation. So choose your situation and surrounding plants carefully to limit any interference that might cause it to curl up its toes. Look at long-lasting groundcovers, perennials that need no splitting, or even a wild grass mix that simply requires a haircut once a year. Cut the shrub back every second year to reduce stem woodiness and energise the plant into producing new leaf. A nurseryman recommends pinching off the tips of new branches in late October to encourage fresh, dense growth and flowers.

Plants are troublesome to propagate, although it can be done, either from seed, or tip cuttings taken in August. Some perseverance may be required, along with an overhead mister, warming element beneath the seedling tray, and a sand mix in which to root the 50 mm long tips. Sow seeds in a fine seedling mix in light shade and keep them moist.

Syncolostemon densiflorous

Pink plume.

Spectacular bright pink to crimson flowers take centre-stage in the garden anytime from October to June. These gorgeous flowers grow in clusters of 4 – 6 large, tubular inflorescences, each 18 and 23 mm long, the tubular shape common to plants pollinated by sunbirds. The Pink Plume grows 1m - 2m x 1 m and has an erect, neat but rather loose form that branches from low down. Small, grey-blue leaves are strongly aromatic with a lightly furry texture and toothed margin along the upper half.

Growth is fast; in areas of full sun and good rains it can grow up to 1m a year. It does not cope well with drought conditions. It is a well-shaped shrub, never outgrowing its given space in even the smallest garden. Prune it back by about a third after flowering will prevent plants becoming lanky and woody. As with *Syncolostemon rotundifolius*, the Pink Plume is reputedly difficult to propagate.

Shrubs prefer full sun situations but, if given a little morning shade, will still flower as long as they receive enough midday sun. It is an excellent plant to attract the sunbirds to the garden, so plant it in a thicket or shrubbery with other bird-attracting plants, near the patio, or outside a bedroom window where you will get a full view of the visiting wildlife. The perfect position for this shrub though is in your grassland bed or at the sunny edge of your woodland.

The natural habitat of the Pink Plume is grassland and forest and woodland margins, often along small streams and on the edges of vleis.

Syncolostemon canescens

Coconut-scented /Grey-haired Sagebush

This family member is a herbaceous perennial so smaller and more dainty than its sisters, the 25 – 60 cm height just perfect for the herb garden. Plants branch near the base with graduating lengths that give it a neat rounded form that needs little shaping. The highly aromatic leaves fold inwards slightly and have a rough texture and fine to coarsely toothed margins. The aromatic oils protect plants from leaf-eating insects and animals. Many small flowers - white, mauve or purple - grow in rings up a long, slender stem from December to April, reaching well above the foliage. Tubular flowers are pollinated by insects like the long-tongued flies.

The Coconut-scented Sagebush loves a sunny to partially shaded spot, preferably with some shelter from the wind. The soft growth is tender to frost, but the woody base will survive and send up new shoots in spring. Prune plants hard once flowering in over to encourage bushiness and abundant flowering the following season. *Syncolostemon canescens* is small enough to use in rockeries, grassland meadow and to edge pathways and steps, or as an eye-catching filler plant in a mixed bed. Tuck smaller perennials around it if you'd prefer to hide the woody base. This species doesn't have the same reputation for being difficult to propagate yet are not widely offered in our nurseries. Multiply the shrub using semi-hardwood cutting taken in late summer, or sow fresh seed in spring. [Refer to PlantzAfrica for more detailed propagation techniques.](#)