

2 Small Cameos for Hot, dry sun or moist , even humid, shade.

Hot, dry sun:

***Aeollanthus parvifolius*, *Aristida junciformis*, *Kalanchoe thyrsiflora*,
Crassula alba, *Plectranthus spicatus***

This delightful water wise grouping greets you as you step off the path onto the grass where it grows in the front of a hot, sunny bed. Squeezed tightly around a low sandstone rock this small cameo will evolve to provide multiple delightful arrangements over the coming weeks. For now, soft white and pink flower stalks of the Rock Sage, *Aeollanthus parvifolius*, mix with the soft flower heads of *Aristida junciformis*. The multi-stemmed Rock Sage never gets too big, reaching 50 cm, the small roundish succulent leaves that enable it to survive drought conditions and shallow soils. In the wild, this little plant tucks into rock crevices where it takes food and moisture from leaf mold that gathers here. The growth form is open, a little sprawling, rather than compact. White to light pink flowers spotted purple grow progressively up tall stalks from November to April.

As the season's progress, slender green seed heads of *Aristida* will fluff out and turn blond as they age and the seeds open up, complementing the pale flowers of the Rock Sage.

At their feet, flat heads of *Crassula alba* show their promise, with just a touch of scarlet peeping through the developing buds. Bright green leaves, long, slender and tapering, open up and spread out as the flowers open towards the end of March through May. Creeping between them all are the frilly, fat leaves of the sun-loving *Plectranthus spicatus* or Lavender Spurflower, gorgeous emerald greens to add to the mix. In April it sends out long flowering spikes with crab-like pincers on the tips. These are the buds which see to take a while to open. Spikes of 8 – 10 cm long lavender blue/mauve flowers stand far above the leaves and on a sunny day are visited by bees and insects. Even dragonflies love to balance on the tips of the tall stems.

Summer green leaves of *Kalanchoe thyrsiflora* begin their upward growth like new floors being added to a tower block. A few old stems remain, leaves turning red as they dry out. The large round leaves gently fold as they move up the growing stem. In winter a red flush covers much of their surface; their bold form adds year-round sculptural good looks, with striking winter hues, an added attraction. In fact, they're one of the most popular succulents used globally.

Managing this grouping:

There is little to do here. All species are from the summer rainfall region, are frost hardy and water wise, coping well in drought conditions. Ensure the soil drains well, and feed only with a mulch layer of compost. No supplementary water is needed.

Watch out for heavy grass fronds enveloping the succulent stems, but they're easy to trim off. In fact, it is important to do so to prevent the succulents rotting from lack of sunlight, too little air movement, and damp conditions beneath the grass cover.

Cut back the remaining fronds of the *Aristida* at the end of winter. They'll send up new shoots with the spring rains.

Aeollanthus parvifolius: trim long flower stem after the April flush of flowers to encourage bushier growth.

Crassula alba: plants die back to ground level after flowering, but shoot again in spring from the base. Cut off dead stems to make space and provide energy for spring growth.

Plectranthus spicata: this perennial groundcover tends to ramble a bit but never smothers neighbouring plants. Cut off unwanted stems; if you have space for them – banks, containers, walls, rockeries – simply pop them into the soil and they'll root.

Kalanchoe thyrsiflora: the tall flower spires eventually fall over and die off. Cut back right at ground level, remove any growing buds and plant elsewhere.

Damp shade – semi-, partial or dappled

Dwarf *Setaria* and *Crocoshmia aurea* – with a background cast of *Strophanthus speciosus*, *Croton gratissimus*, *Cyperus*, *Ludwigia* and a wild *Berkheya*

In this wild section of a back garden, glowing orange *Crocoshmia aurea* stand tall above the bright green leaves of a dwarf *Setaria* species that I'm battling to identify. It grows to a mere 45 cm, a perfect size to replace lawn in shady places. A mature *Croton gratissimus* provides the canopy cover as well as marginal support for a rather rampant Poison Rope, *Strophanthus speciosus* that now hangs as a heavy curtain to the ground. Birds have found this mix of supple climbing stems and the more rigid and thick tree branches to be perfect nesting platforms, and the foliage rustles with life in spring and summer. The result of all these visitors is the germination of wild grasses. The *Crocoshmia* were early adopters of this small corner despite conditions being hot and sunny (*Crocoshmia* is quite adaptable to sunny areas if seeds voluntarily germinate there) but the clump remained tight and small. Now the dense grass cover provides the seeds with moist, fertile soils, and bunches of Falling Stars pop up everywhere. The strong, pleated leaves of the *Setaria* hold them gently upright so the pendulous flowers are seen at their best. And the birds have added more species that thrive in the half-day sun off the side; *Cyperus* sp., a wild *Berkheya* and *Ludwigia octovalvis* add spring and summer interest; they have seeded in a spot kept damp with grey water from the kitchen. *Setaria megaphylla* helps with water purification as it absorbs excess nutrients from the water, so I'm assuming this small species will too. All of which bring in the birds and insects; Mannikins, finches, bulbuls, mousebirds, weavers, Batis and Brown-hooded Kingfisher. Praying Mantis' hunt for food among the leaves, and Common Bush Brown butterflies flit among the leaves at ground level. The grass and bulbs die down during the dry winter, their leaves covering the ground to provide warm hideouts for insects and others.

Other shade grasses for damp soils to try:

Panicum maximum - Guinea Grass

Oplismenus hirtellus – Basket Grass

Managing this grouping:

Grass and bulb species thrive in damp soils in light, partial or dappled shade. Both cope with a light to moderate frost but are winter dormant; with dead leaf cover insulating the seeds through winter, new seedlings should germinate in spring.

Setaria; control unwanted spread into other areas; at the end of winter, if the dead leaf layer is too thick, remove it. Plants are self-seeding and seedlings will sprout with the spring rains.

Crocoshmia aurea: cut off dead leaves at the end of winter, or to tidy up if needed.