

Focus on Foliage

We, gardeners, are cheerfully seduced by flowers, whether with impulsive buys of plants already in bloom, or more controlled buys of plants to fit a specific design plan. In fact, most admit to planning a design around colour.

But even longest-lasting flower shows are temporary; foliage displays, on the other hand, particularly of evergreen species, are permanent. Trees and shrubs make up the long-term greenery of your garden providing the structure, form, line and natural elegance that pull together the various components of the garden into a cohesive whole. And looking at the plant's qualities when it is out of flower is where should begin our designs. Flowers are crucial of course, providing pollen and nectar for birds and insects, but too often we forget about including the larger shrubs that are just as important to animal life cycles. Focusing on building your structure with foliage can help to change that. Small gardens, in particular, benefit from building up a layered framework of foliage rather than a single-minded focus on flowers.

Most sections of the garden will need a green backdrop; larger species to flesh out the garden boundaries and as components of the internal framework, and smaller shrubs for lower-growing screens, to add height in a sunny bed, or as part of a shrubbery.

The shrubs listed here from small to large shrubs as well as a few small trees hold their shape through the year.

The Choice hierarchy:

- Purpose: what do you want the plant to do? Is it to provide a privacy screen or windbreak, as an ornamental hedge or boundary screen, or to section off the garden into secluded areas, or build habitat areas like thickets, that offer food and shelter to animals?
- Evergreen or deciduous: do you need sun in winter or foliage year-round? Keep wildlife needs in mind.
- Special: Do you need a focal point, a 'star-performer', something decorative or with a strong outline?
- Existing: Look at what you already have, where you need to make changes or improve with new additions. Add species for contrast or to highlight an area or display. Close your eyes; when you open them, is your first impression one of a melding of bland green before your eyes focus once again on colour elements? Would large leaves or grey leaves add punch?
- Bonus elements: fruit and flowers provide functional support for local animals and add to the overall diversity of the garden. While form and good looks are the main characteristics, the bonus elements of fruit and flowers provide functional support for local animals and add to the overall diversity of the garden.

The background greenery – trees and shrubs along the boundary, for example – affect how the rest of the garden is displayed – and comes in a variety of colour shades, combinations, leaf size, shape and texture, and, important in small gardens, how much space they fill. And this background offsets the short-term flowers that flash and fade through the year like Christmas tree lights.

Colour and shape: Look at leaf colour through the year; new spring growth can be red or lime green, or copper and russets through autumn. Large leaves appear closer and take up space as they are more noticeable from afar. In high wind areas, these should be avoided as wind shreds large, soft leaves.

Certain micro-climates will suggest a leaf type: narrow needle-like leaves are common in areas that experience hot, dry summers as the reduced leaf surface reduces water lost through transpiration. Blue, grey, silver leaves reflect heat and are common in groundcovers that spread over hot surfaces. Shady areas commonly have shrubs with large, dark green leaves that are adapted to absorb light for photosynthesis.

Texture provides interest from a distance as well as from close-up; large leaves can be more appealing from far off than small ones, and those that invite you to touch and smell, like satin or rough leaves, scalloped margins and a minty scent, should be placed within arm's reach.

If you need to trim the shrub frequently, choose those with small leaves and multi-stems as they look neat soon after a prune compared with those with large leaves and fewer stems.

Categories:

Grey leaves

Small needle-like leaves

Medium-sized leaves – tough, blue/ green

Furry Texture

Large leaves

Shade

Stiff leaves

Feathery or weeping form

Bright green leaves

Dark green

Glossy leaves

Deciduous skeleton

Spiky

Small leaves

Colour changes

Bi-coloured Leaves

Tightly packed, multi-stemmed shrubs

Ground level foliage

High impact shrubs with attractive leaf colour and strong form/ structure

Grey /silver leaves:

Barleria albostellata - Grey Barleria	1.5 x 1.5 m
Buddleja glomerata - Karoo Sage	4 x 3 m
Helichrysum petiolare - Silver Bush Everlasting	1 x 1 m
Helichrysum populifolium – Poplar Helichrysum	3 x 2 m
Leucospermum reflexum - Rocket Pincushion	3 x 3 m
Podalyria sericea - Satin Bush	1x 1 m
Salvia africana-lutea - Beach Salvia	Up to 2 m
Salvia dolomitica - Dolomite Sage	1.2 x 1 m
Syncarpha argyropsis - White Everlasting	50 x 50 cm
Tarchonanthus camphoratus - Camphor Bush	6 x 4 m

Small needle-like leaves:

Coleonema album – Cape May	1.2 x 1 m
Coleonema pulchellum – Confetti Bush/ Buchu	1.2 x 1 m
Eriocephalus africana - Wild Rosemary	1.2 x 1.2
Metalasia muricata - White Bristle Bush	2 x 2
Muraltia spinosa - Tortoise Berry	1.2 x 1.2 m

Medium-sized leaves – tough, blue/ green

Aloe arborescens – Krantz Aloe	3 x 3 m
Buddleja auriculata - Weeping Sage	4 x 3 m
Buddleja saligna - False Olive	4 x 3 m
Diospyros lycioides - Bluebush	4 x 3 m
Diospyros scabrida - Coastal Bladdernut	2 x 2 m
Diospyros whyteana - Bladdernut 5 x 5 m Bladdernut 5 x 5 m	
Grewia flava - Brandy Bush	2 x 3 m
Metarungia longistrobis - Sunbird Bush	1.8 x 1 m
Podalyria calypttrata - Sweetpea Bush between	2 – 4 m
Searsia glauca - Blue Kuni-bush	3 x 4 m
Tinnea barbata - Purple Tinnea	1.5 x 1.5 m

Furry Texture:

Barleria albostellata - Grey Barleria	1.5 x 1.5 m
Grewia flava - Brandy Bush	2 x 3 m
Grewia lasiocarpa - Forest Raisin	5 x 4 m
Helichrysum petiolare - Silver Bush Everlasting	1 x 1 m
Hoslundia opposita – Orange Bird-berry	1.5 x 1.5 m
Leucosidea sericea – Ouhout	5 – 7 m
Phyllica plumosa - Featherhead	1 x .80 m
Sparrmannia africana - Cape Stock-rose	3 x 4 m
Tinnea barbata - Purple Tinnea	1.5 x 1.5 m

Large leaves:

Aloes arborescens - Krantz Aloe	3 x 3 m
Barleria albostellata - Grey Barleria	1.5 x 1.5 m
Bauhinia galpinii – Pride-of-the-Cape	3 x 5 m
Burchellia bubalina - Wild Pomegranate	2.5 x 1.5 m
Dombeya burgessiae - Pink Wild Pear	4 x 4 m
Duvernoia adhatodoides - Pistol Bush	3.5 x 3 m
Grewia lasiocarpa - Forest Raisin	5 x 4 m
Greyia sutherlandii – Natal Bottlebrush	3 – 7 m
Mackaya bella - Forest Bells	3 x 2 m
Searsia lucida - Glossy Current	2.5 x 4
Sparrmannia africana - Cape Stock-rose	3 x 4 m
Strelitzia juncea - Crane Flower	1.5 x 1.5 m
Strelitzia reginae - Bird-of-paradise flower	1.5 x 1.5 m

Shade:

<i>Buxus macowanii</i> - Cape Box	6 x 9 m
<i>Dracaena alectrifomis</i> – Large-leaved Dragon Tree	2 x 1.5 m
<i>Duvernoia adhatodoides</i> - Pistol Bush	3.5 x 3 m
<i>Mackaya bella</i> - Forest Bells	3 x 2 m
<i>Mitriostigma axillare</i> - Small False Loquat	2 x 3 m
<i>Psychotria capensis</i> - Black Bird Berry	3 x 3 m
<i>Rhamnus prinoides</i> - Blinkblaar	4 x 4 m
<i>Tarenna pavettoides</i> - False Bride's Bush	4 x 4 m
<i>Xylothea kraussiana</i> – African Dog Rose	2 x 2 up to 5 x 5 m

Stiff leaves:

<i>Carissa bispinosa</i> – Forest Num-num	2 x 2 m
<i>Carissa edulis</i> - Simple-spined Num-num	3 x 3 m
<i>Carissa macrocarpa</i> – Num-num	3 x 4 m
<i>Coddia rudis</i> – Small Bone Apple	2 x 2 m
<i>Crassula ovata</i> – Pink Joy	1.8 x 1.5 m
<i>Diospyros</i> species	
<i>Ehretia rigida</i> Puzzle Bush	4 x 4 m
<i>Eugenia capensis</i> Dune Myrtle	2 x 2 m
<i>Gardenia cornuta</i> – Natal Gardenia	3 – 5 m
<i>Gardenia thunbergia</i> – White Gardenia	2 – 5 m
<i>Gymnosporia arenicola</i> – Dune Spike-thorn	3 x 3 m
<i>Gymnosporia heterophylla</i> – Common Spike-thorn	3 x 3 m
<i>Leucadendron</i> & <i>Protea</i> species	
<i>Leucospermum reflexum</i> Rocket Pincushion	3 x 3 m
<i>Muraltia spinosa</i> Tortoise Berry	1.2 x 1.2 m
<i>Xylothea kraussiana</i> – African Dog Rose	2 x 2 up to 5 x 5 m

Bright green leaves:

<i>Bauhinia galpinii</i> – Pride-of-the-Cape	3 x 5 m
<i>Carissa bispinosa</i> – Forest Num-num	2 x 2 m
<i>Carissa edulis</i> - Simple-spined Num-num	3 x 3 m
<i>Coddia rudis</i> – Small Bone Apple	2 x 2 m
<i>Duvernoia acontiflora</i> – Lemon Pistol Bush	3 x 4 m
<i>Ehretia rigida</i> - Puzzle Bush	4 x 4 m
<i>Greyia sutherlandii</i> – Natal Bottlebrush	3 – 7 m
<i>Gymnosporia bachmannii</i> – Willow Spike-thorn	3 x 3 m
<i>Gymnosporia heterophylla</i> – Common Spike-thorn	3 x 3 m
<i>Hoslundia opposita</i> – Orange Bird-berry	1.5 x 1.5 m
<i>Hypericum revolutum</i> - Curry Bush	2 x 2 m
<i>Ochna serrulata</i> – Mickey Mouse Bush	2.5 x 2.5 m
<i>Portulacaria afra</i> –Porkbush	2 m upwards
<i>Searsia crenata</i> – Dune Crowberry	3 x 4 m
<i>Sparrmannia africana</i> - Cape Stock-rose	3 x 4 m

Dark green:

<i>Dracaena alectrifomis</i> – Large-leaved Dragon Tree	2 x 1.5 m
<i>Duvernoia adhatodoides</i> - Pistol Bush	3.5 x 3 m
<i>Mackaya bella</i> - Forest Bells	3 x 2 m
<i>Mitriostigma axillare</i> - Small False Loquat	2 x 3 m
<i>Psychotria capensis</i> - Black Bird Berry	3 x 3 m
<i>Tabernaemontana ventricosa</i> – Toad Tree	5 x 5 m
<i>Tarennia pavettoides</i> - False Bride's Bush	4 x 4 m
<i>Tricalysia lanceolata</i> - Common Tricalysia	4 x 4 m
<i>Trichocladus crinitus</i> - Black Witch-hazel	2.5 x 2 m
<i>Trichocladus ellipticus</i> - White Witch-hazel	3 x 3 m
<i>Xylotheca kraussiana</i> – African Dog Rose	2 x 2 up to 5 x 5 m

Glossy leaves:

<i>Croton gratissimus</i> – Lavender Croton	6 x 5 m
<i>Croton pseudopulchellus</i> - Small Lavender Croton	2 x 3 m
<i>Greyia sutherlandii</i> – Natal Bottlebrush	3 – 7 m
<i>Gymnosporia bachmannii</i> - Willow Spike-thorn	3 x 3 m
<i>Heteropyxis natalensis</i> – Lavender Tree	6 x 5 m
<i>Hyperacanthus amoenus</i> - Spiny Gardenia	5 x 4 m
<i>Myrsine africana</i> - Cape Myrtle	1.5 x 1 m
<i>Ochna natalitia</i> - Natal Plane	4 x 3 m
<i>Pavetta lanceolata</i> - Forest Bride's Bush	3 x 3 m
<i>Searsia crenata</i> - Dune Crow-berry	3 x 5 m
<i>Syzygium pondoense</i> – Pondo Waterwood	3 x 3 m / 2 x 1.5 m
<i>Tabernaemontana ventricosa</i> – Toad Tree	5 x 5 m
<i>Tricalysia lanceolata</i> - Common Tricalysia	4 x 4 m
<i>Trichocladus crinitus</i> - Black Witch-hazel	2.5 x 2 m

Deciduous skeleton:

<i>Greyia sutherlandii</i> – Natal Bottlebrush	3 – 7 m
<i>Heteropyxis natalensis</i> – Lavender Tree	6 x 5 m
<i>Ochna natalitia</i> - Natal Plane	4 x 3 m
<i>Ziziphus mucronata</i> – Buffalo-thorn	up to 10 m

Small leaves:

<i>Buddleja saligna</i> – False Olive	4 x 3 m
<i>Carissa bispinosa</i> - Forest Num-num	2 x 2 m
<i>Coleonema album</i> – Cape May	1.2 x 1 m
<i>Coleonema pulchellum</i> – Confetti Bush/ Buchu	1.2 x 1 m
<i>Freylinia lanceolata</i> – Honeybells	4.5 x 4 m
<i>Freylinia tropica</i> – Tropical Freylinia	2 x 1 m
<i>Gymnosporia bachmannii</i> – Willow Spike-thorn	3 x 3 m
<i>Myrsine africana</i> - Cape Myrtle	1.5 x 1 m
<i>Syzygium pondoense</i> – Pondo Waterwood	3 x 3 m / 2 x 1.5 m

Colour changes:

Croton gratissimus – Lavender Croton	6 x 5 m
Croton pseudopulchellus – Small Lavender Croton	2 x 3 m
Diospyros scabrida - Coastal Bladdernut	2 x 2 m
Diospyros whyteana - Bladdernut	5 x 5 m
Euclea natalensis - Natal guarri, Natal ebony	4 – 10 m – gold-tinged new leaf
Greyia sutherlandii – Natal Bottlebrush	3 – 7 m – purple/red autumn leaves
Heteropyxis natalensis – Lavender Tree	6 x 5 m - bright green in spring
Hyperacanthus amoenus - Spiny Gardenia	5 x 4 m
Leucadendron species – Evergreen shrubs with leathery leaves. Between 2 – 5 m	
Myrsine africana - Cape Myrtle	1.5 x 1 m
Ochna natalitia - Natal Plane	4 x 3 m
Ochna serrulata – Micky Mouse Bush	2.5 x 2.5 m
Searsia crenata - Dune Crow-berry	3 x 5 m
Searsia dentata - Nana Berry	3 x 4 m
Syzygium pondoense – Pondo Waterwood	3 x 3 m / 2 x 1.5 m

Bi-coloured Leaves:

Croton gratissimus – Lavender Croton	6 x 5 m
Croton pseudopulchellus - Small Lavender Croton	2 x 3 m
Trichocladus crinitus - Black Witch-hazel	2.5 x 2 m
Trichocladus ellipticus - White Witch-hazel	3 x 3 m

Tightly packed, multi-stemmed shrubs:

Coddia rudis – Small Bone Apple	2 x 2 m
Euclea natalensis - Natal guarri, Natal ebony	4 – 10 m
Euclea undulata - Common Guarri	up to 7 m
Freylinia lanceolata – Honeybells	4,5 x 4 m
Freylinia tropica – Tropical Freylinia	2 x 1 m
Gardenia species	
Gymnosporia species	
Portulacaria afra – Porkbush	2 m upwards
Psychotria capensis - Black Bird Berry	3 x 3 m
Rhamnus prinoides – Blinkblaar	4 x 4 m
Searsia crenata - Dune Crow-berry	3 x 5 m

Feathery or weeping form:

Freylinia lanceolata - Honey Bell Bush	4 x 3 m
Heteropyxis natalensis – Lavender Tree	6 x 5 m
Phyllica plumosa - Featherhead	1 x .80 m
Tarenna pavettoides - False Bride's Bush	4 x 4 m

Ground level foliage:

Duvernoia acontiflora – Lemon Pistol Bush	3 x 4 m
Eugenia capensis - Dune Myrtle	2 x 2 m
Gymnosporia bachmannii – Willow Spike-thorn	3 x 3 m
Searsia crenata - Dune Crow-berry	3 x 5 m
Sparrmannia africana - Cape Stock-rose	3 x 4 m
Tinnea barbata - Purple Tinnea	1.5 x 1.5 m

Spiky:

Aloe arborescens – Krantz Aloe	3 x 3
Blechnum tabulare – Mountain Blechnum	1 x 1
Encephalartos altensteinii – Eastern Cape Cycad	4 x 3 m
Encephalartos villosus – Ground Cycad Leaves up to 3 m long	

High impact shrubs with attractive leaf colour and strong form/ structure:

Aloe arborescens – Krantz Aloe	3 x 3 m
Coddia rudis – Small Bone Apple	2 x 2 m
Diospyros species	
Greyia sutherlandii – Natal Bottlebrush	3 – 7 m
Gymnosporia glaucophylla – Blue Spikethorn	3 x 3 m
Myrsine africana - Cape Myrtle	1.5 x 1 m
Ziziphus mucronata – Buffalo-thorn	up to 10 m
Cussonia paniculata – Mountain Cabbage Tree	5 m