

Sublime Spring Colour

Around a gentle curve in this sunny pathway is a most unusual cameo that, come spring and summer time, is sublime! To describe it in gardening terms, one might write of a scarlet *Kleinia* that gambols at the feet of a Cape Rattle-pod heavy with yellow blooms, a shy *Polygala virgata* peering through its canopy. In my imagination, though, Miss Scarlet meets Colonel Mustard in the garden with the Purple Broom!

While it is not yet spring, we're impatient for it to arrive, and this cameo gives us an idea of the topsy-turvy flowering seasons we're currently experiencing, but, let's get to identifying that gorgeous tumbling *Kleinia*. Succulent expert, Ben Botha, suggests *K. abyssinica*, a West African plant from Zambia. So, we're disappointed, but, South African gardeners can replace it with *K. galpinii*, not as tall as this species, but producing a similar effect, and we'll make reference from now on to our local species. Back to the topsy-turvy flowering times; normal flowering times for *K. galpinii* is December to February /March, *Crotalaria capensis* from October to April, and the Purple Broom, *Polygala virgata*, from September to February. But, in this garden of landscaper Jenny Dean, plants celebrate the beginning of spring in full colour. I don't ever recall seeing them without.

Kleinia galpinii has blue-green lance-shaped leaves with smooth, entire margins that grow in upright rosettes. Familiar orange to scarlet buttons nod gracefully from the tips of branching stems well above the leaves, large and soft, and I find the impulse to touch them impossible to resist! Varying inland nurseries suggest plants grow to between 25 and 45 cm; here, *K. abyssinica* tops 60 cm, but plants do tend to grow large in our benevolent coastal climate. Once established the *Kleinia* is extremely drought hardy though this species requires rain in the heat of summer, and they cope with a light to moderate frost. Steer clear of fertilisers that encourage leggy growth; instead, mulch the soil with compost. *Kleinia galpinii* likes full sun but will tolerate a little afternoon shade, suggests Jenny, and I recall Elsa Pooley mentioning she finds sibling *Kleinia fulgens* does better with some afternoon shade when grown away from the coast. Plants root easily from cuttings planted in free-draining garden soil. Flowers attract butterflies, bees and other insects. If you find *K. galpinii* difficult to source, mass *Kleinia fulgens* beneath the Cape Rattle-pod for a similar impact.

The *Crotalaria* is a sun worshipper. It is a bit prone to sooty mould Jenny indicates and is often inundated with striped hairy caterpillars, so one has to put up with many chewed leaves. Along with five moth species, it plays host to the Brown Playboy and the Long-tailed Blue butterflies, the latter being one of the most wide-spread butterflies throughout SA, Africa, Asia, Australia, and Europe. It is a quick-growing shrub or small tree, between 2 – 5 m high. The mid- to dark green foliage has a gently drooping habit echoed by the large, pendulous flowers borne from October to April, and intermittently through the year. They're often edged with red, perhaps another reason why the shrub looks so good fronted by orange-red flowering companions. Flowers are pollinated by carpenter bees. This is not a shrub for dry areas, requiring moderate to good rains through its

growing season. *Crotalaria capensis* handles only a light frost so provide protection in cold areas. A successful pioneer shrub, it provides the gardener with a fast screen or windbreak.

The height of the slender Purple Broom allows the sprays of dark purple to bright magenta to mingle with the yellow gold of the *Crotalaria*. The flowering display of this member of the cameo is still in its infancy, but the single spray never-the-less heralds a beautiful mid-spring to summer show. Flowering usually begins before the leaves appear, but plants flower on and off through the year when they stand tall above the long, thin leaves. Plants of this *Polygala* species only last a couple of years at most, but they self-seed so easily there are always replacements ready to take their place in the sun - or light to semi-shade. *Polygala* is another of the host plants of Long-tailed Blue butterfly, and flowers attract bees, including carpenter bees, as well as other insects.

The effectiveness of this grouping comes not only from its striking colour palette, but as an abundant source of food for insects – and ensures the Long-tailed Blue will keep on flying!

Kleinia galpinii

Size: 25 - 45 cm

Flowering season: Spring and summer

Position: sun or semi-shade

Water needs: summer rains, otherwise, water wise

Frost: Moderate

Distribution and habitat: KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga in rocky places and woodland edges

Crotalaria capensis

Size: 2 - 5 m

Flowering season: October to April

Position: sun

Water needs: Moderate

Frost: light

Distribution and habitat: Eastern Cape, Free State, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, Western Cape in fynbos, woodland, grassland, thicket.

Polygala virgata

Size: 1,5 - 2 m

Flowering season: spring, summer

Position: sun; semi-shade; partial shade

Water needs: Moderate

Frost: Moderate

Distribution and habitat: Eastern Cape, Free State, Gauteng, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, Northern Cape, Western Cape in grassland