

# Lavender and Flaming Orange

The Krantz Aloe and Blue-flowering Companions – By Jenny Dean

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I have often been enchanted by images of fields of exotic Lavender - splendid purple hues stretching into the distance. Being passionate about all things indigenous meant searching for local plants to give the same look. A degraded hillside on my property gave me the perfect opportunity to try out some ideas. Here you will see tracts of *Hypoestes aristata* or Ribbon bush and *Barleria obtusa* sprawling together in glorious mauve clouds. Here and there the plantings are interspersed with *Tephrosia grandiflora* - a sight which never fails to lift my heart each May. Of course, being local the plants are attractive to butterflies and insects of all kinds – an added bonus.

The Ribbon bush has flowers like exquisite florists bows – purple splashed with white and lilac – no artist could do better. The sky blue blooms of *Barleria obtusa* are the perfect complement. Quite by chance *Pycnostachys urticifolia* (Blue boys) has seeded itself into the mix. And what a happy accident this has been. Deep blue spikes adorn the vigorous shrubs and look especially wonderful at dusk. Sister plant *Pycnostachys reticulata* also arrived – pale blue flowers are followed by dark purple seed heads which are just as attractive as the blooms themselves.

Of course, this combination is entrancing during these autumn months but we want interest all year. Underplantings of Ngongoni grass (*Aristida junciformis*) serve this purpose admirably. Blonde and fluffy in winter *Aristida* forms sheets of waving gold heads while in summer they change into bright green fronds. Massed plantings of this tough easily grown grass look particularly beautiful when a breeze blows through them. Farmers loathe this grass which is supposedly a sign of poorly managed veld. I have found it to be a component of Sandstone Sourveld (classified as Critically Endangered) where it exists quite happily with its other grassland companions without invasive tendencies. (I have owned a piece of the above grassland for 25 years and have seen it first hand). So I have a very different picture of Ngongoni grass and use it wherever I can. A bonus for gardeners is that it hardly ever needs cutting back unlike many of the other indigenous grasses.

Following on the theme of continuous interest in the garden – there are swathes of *Aloe arborescens* which will burst into bloom in June. There are many colour forms of this common and most useful species, ranging from pale peach to bright orange and flame red. There are gold flowers and pale yellow, even a form called “limelight” which has a bright lime yellow flower and similar foliage. Sunbirds bring jewel-like colour - Black, Greater Double-collared, Olive and Grey. I have even had Malachite Sunbird a resident of the Berg visiting in winter. Indigenous gardens are full of unexpected gifts....

If you have a difficult bank or an area which needs non-fussy planting then this is the ideal combination for you, with the proviso that the site is not too hot and dry. My hillside is a dampish south-west facing slope. Given sufficient water until well established the plants will thrive with very little care. You will need to do a yearly pruning after flowering. If your space is small then try one of each of the above. I ignore the so-called “fruit salad” rule – diversity for me is much more important and if you love the plants and the creatures they attract then who cares if you have a little bit of this and a little bit of that?

It is your garden after all.