The Rutaceae family, more familiar as the buchu family, has been known and loved by many generations. The Khoi-Khoi introduced the plants to the early European botanists who described their medicinal properties in their publications. The buchu, however, also have great potential as garden plants.

They make up one of the seven main components of the fynbos, extending from the drier regions of the Cedarberg in the north, to the Cape Peninsula in the south and eastwards all the way along the south western Cape fold mountains to George, Humansdorp and Port Elizabeth. Their habitat ranges from the cool, often alpine conditions of mountain tops enjoyed by the beautiful *Agathosma adenandriflora* that occurs on top of the Waboomsberg in the Ceres district, to the windswept dunes of the Cape coast where the wind has made natural bonsais on the Cape may, *Coleonema album*.

Buchu are quite easy to distinguish in the veld by their aromatic and sometimes rather pungent smell released when the leaves are bruised. This typical buchu smell is caused by oil glands in the leaves. The plants flower in the winter and spring, their dainty pink, mauve or white star-shaped flowers attracting masses of bees. With their fresh all year round smell and pretty winter display, buchu can only be an asset to your garden.

With the Rutaceae being such a large family (14 genera and 259 species) with enough species in the genus *Agathosma* to blow your mind, why then has so little been available to the home gardener? The answer lies in the difficulty in propagating these plants. Before one can even start experimenting with growing the plants, one has the greater difficulty of collecting the seeds! The flowering seasons stretch over a number of months so that not all the seeds ripen at the same time. One has to visit the bush on numerous occasions to obtain sufficient seed. Then once the seed capsule has ripened, it spontaneously splits open, shooting the seed out in every direction. If, on the other hand, you collect the seed capsules before the embryo has had a chance to ripen, your seed will be non-viable. So one really has to be in the right place at the right time!

Propagation from cuttings has proved to be quite a challenge too. For the past two years, I have been carrying out rooting experiments in the nursery at Kirstenbosch and, with the help of students, have tried different rooting hormones, rooting mediums, as well as different times of the year for cuttings. The results have certainly proved varied and rather interesting.

Not all buchu like the same hormone treatment and the time of year plays an important role in the success of one's cuttings. All the buchu show the necessity for under-heating and overhead misting, although one must be careful not to mist the plants too often as this waterslogs the rooting medium and the cuttings will then rot. The cuttings take between two to three months to root and a year to 'grow on' before they can be sold. With the rooting trials continuing and the interest in waterwise and indigenous gardening, more and more buchu are becoming available in the Garden Shop and other nurseries.
Of the plants that are available on the market, *Agathosma mucronulata* is definitely one of my favourites. It is a fairly slow-growing buchu with dense clusters of mauve flowers from mid-June to August on a nice, rounded little shrub that reaches a height of 50 cm. The leaves have a terrific smell and the bees cannot resist its flowers. It does extremely well in sandy soil, having adapted to the sandy conditions of the Cape Flats.

*Acmaedia heterophylla* has its origins in Bredasdorp and Mossel Bay where it grows on coastal limestone. It is, however, fairly adaptable and will grow in heavier clay soil and in containers. A low shrub, seldom over 40 cm high, it is one of those nice plants that always seems to have flowers on it. Officially, it flowers from January to April, but this seems to be its peak season for it is always dotted with dainty pink flowers. *Agathosma mucronulata* also deserves a special mention. This rewarding shrub, which reaches a height of 1 m, is covered in a profusion of white flowers from August to October. Each white petal has a pattern of orange-brown dots on it - much appreciated by the bees. Fairly slow growing, once established however, it is a very rewarding shrub.

For those with coastal gardens *Coleonema album* is a good choice. Its small white gypsophylla-like flowers and lovely smell make this plant a must for tussie-mussies! *Agathosma glabrata*, *A. ovata* ‘Kuitjieskraal’, *Coleonema pulchellum* (with pink flowers) and *A. serpilloaceae* with dense clusters of pale mauve flowers also do well along the coast.

Most of the buchu need full sun, but there are a few that will tolerate semi-shade. *Agathosma lanceolata* and *A. ciliaris* are two such species. *A. lanceolata* has a wonderful liquorice smell and occurs naturally on the eastern slopes of Table Mountain. The coleonemas will also tolerate semi-shade, although they do not flower as much in the shade as they would in the sun. The leaf texture and aroma, however, make up for the lack of flowers.

If your soil is on the alkaline side I suggest you plant *Acmaedia heterophylla* and *A. mundiana*, the latter a taller shrub of 1 m or more with pink flowers from April to October. *Agathosma serpilloaceae* and *A. cerefolium* will also thrive in such soils. Both are neat, compact shrubs of up to 60 cm.

There are some rules of thumb when planting out buchu. Try not to disturb any of the roots when transferring the plants from the bag to the ground. Remember not to add any compost or
inorganic fertilizers to the planting hole. Your buchu will, however, benefit from organic fertilizers like Seagro. The best time to plant is just after the first winter rains have started in autumn until early spring. This ensures that they will be well established before the onset of summer. You will need to water the plants for the first summer, but after that they will be able to manage on very little water in summer – good plants for your waterwise garden. Remember to leave plenty of space for your buchu to develop its shape properly.

They are slow growing and need time, at least two to three years, to develop to their full potential. If a faster growing plant overgrows the buchu, the buchu will lose its shape forever. For a nice splash of colour, plant at least three of a species together.

To help you decide which buchu you prefer, come and visit the developing Buchu Garden in the Protea Section of Kirstenbosch. Buchus will bring lasting pleasure to you and all those that visit your garden, insect and human alike. They are a must for every garden.