Mimetes fimbriifolius is widespread and commonly encountered whereas the majority are either scarce or restricted to very limited areas and therefore regarded as rare.

The promotion of Mimetes fimbriifolius is but the first of many promotions from the Plant Utilization Nursery. This majestic species is endemic to the Cape Peninsula occurring on acid mountain sandstone soils from Table Mountain to Cape Point. It is the largest, and longest-lived, of the Mimetes and with age acquires the form of a strong densely-branched shrub or small tree averaging 3-5 m at maturity. A stout, clearly-defined trunk of about 0.5 m serves to support an attractive, rounded crown consisting of repeatedly dichotomous, interlocking branchlets.

The trunk and branches are protected by a thick layer of cork bark that helps the mature plant to survive veld fires. Regeneration after fire is by terminal shoots on the upper branches. It is one of the hardest species of the Mimetes, but has a very slow growth rate with an average of between 12 and 14 years from germination to flowering. This drawback has been partly overcome by propagating the plant from cuttings which were rooted on heated mist propagation benches. Although the growth rate is still slow, the plants have the potential to flower within a shorter period of time, as the cuttings were taken from mature stock. M. fimbriifolius may flower erratically from July to December but the normal peak flowering period occurs during September. Inflorescences consist of several capitula arranged in the axils of the upper leaves which, during the flowering period, have characteristic reddish-pink tips. The specific name “fimbriifolius” means “fringe-leaved” which refers to the fringe of delicate white hairs on the leaf margins.

Horticultural potential

There are numerous reasons for recommending M. fimbriifolius as a garden subject. It is important to be aware of its preferences as not all garden situations will be suitable. These preferences include well-drained acidic soils derived from Table Mountain sandstones and an adequate amount of moisture. In nature, these plants receive good winter rain and moisture levels during the summer months are augmented by moisture laden south-easterly clouds. As this species is concentrated south of Smitswinkel Bay where it is frequently exposed to strong buffeting winds, it may be suitable for some coastal gardens where there is a degree of protection. Please beware of planting in highly exposed areas close to the sea where it will be subject to fierce salt-laden winds.

M. fimbriifolius is one of the hardiest species of Mimetes and has a lifespan exceeding that of most of the species of the Proteaceae. A native specimen could prove an unusual feature plant in a medium to large garden with the added attraction of seasonal colour during flowering time. The flowers contain a nectar which serves to attract sugarbirds and sunbirds. The local potential of Mimetes fimbriifolius has been alluded to by Dr John Rourke in his revision of Mimetes “Trees are rare in open fynbos. Therefore the arborescent life form, so typical of this species, has inevitably made it one of the conspicuous and characteristic elements in the Cape Peninsula’s flora”. Limited numbers of these plants will be on sale next to the Botanical Society Shop from 09h00 on Saturday, 7 October, 1989. Due to limited stocks only two plants will be available to each member of the public.

INDIGENOUS PLANTS FOR CAPE COASTAL GARDENS

by A Barrie Low, Cape Flats Nature Reserve, University of the Western Cape

1. Soils and setting the scene

The challenge of developing a coastal garden in the Cape has often deterred the most resolute of homeowners. Faced with impoverished soils and the at times severe summer droughts in the winter rainfall region, the amateur gardener often struggles to secure a plant cover which is hardy and functional, yet at the same time attractive.

This is the first in a three-part series on indigenous garden development along the Cape coast which, it is hoped, will encourage the reader to plan and produce a low-maintenance indigenous garden which will survive the elements. In general I shall be referring to the winter rainfall region of the Western Cape and to areas which have calcareous soils (see definition below). Plants which I recommend for these conditions are more than likely to survive on more fertile sites with summer or non-seasonal rainfall regimes.

In this article I discuss the importance of soil and how you can determine what type is present on your plot. Article two will feature a selection of appropriate indigenous plants, while the third will deal with planning your garden and landscaping.

To begin with I will assume that readers of these articles are, like me, not homespun horticulturists and do not have the proverbial green finger or very much time for gardening. Personally I favour plants which can be introduced with a minimum of fuss and which require even less effort to maintain in an acceptable condition. Lovers of sophisticated exposes on “soft”
gardening are warned not to read further as some of my ideas might offend! This is written specifically for the individual who desires maximum results for minimum effort and who is quite happy to settle for indigenous as opposed to exotic plants.

My approach is simple and requires two basic preconditions: firstly, the soil on your plot ideally should be natural and not contaminated with builders' rubble (I deal with this aspect in the third article) and secondly, indigenous plants adapted to the local soils and conditions must be used. If you’re looking for a totally maintenance-free garden, then look elsewhere for a miracle; short of concreting your back yard and painting it green, maintenance-free gardens do not exist. However, I can assure you that if you adhere to the suggestions and ideas in these articles you will certainly reduce maintenance without necessarily sacrificing attractiveness and functionality.

I start by assuming that the reader has some inkling of what indigenous is. Indigenous means local, and we all know that local is lekker. But just remember a few cardinal ground rules. ONE: just because a plant is indigenous, do not assume it will grow anywhere within the general locality of where that particular plant is found naturally. TWO: how well a plant will do will depend to a large extent on the siting of your garden-to-be, and what previous perturbations (disturbances) might have occurred — soil disturbance is critical to plant survival and development (more about these two points later).

The soil factor

Perhaps the most critical factor in developing an indigenous garden is the origin and quality of the soil. Many Cape winter rainfall region indigenous plants will tolerate summer or all year round rainfall, and these are conditions which to some extent can be controlled in the garden environment. However, soils are of absolute importance in maintaining plant growth and survival. In preparing for this article I paged through some popular texts on South African indigenous plant growing. One is astounded to discover that while indigenous plant utilization was actively promoted, in certain cases the advice was given that the soil had to be drastically “amplified”. Drastic alteration of your soil can be anathema to the very plants you would wish to one day grace your garden.

Our indigenous plants have evolved over millions of years on specific soil types. We must therefore be extremely wary of trying to outdo nature through the addition of compost and fertilizer, as these might be detrimental to plant growth and even survival. Artificial fertilization of fynbos species has in some cases been shown to reduce plant lifespans and even decrease the number of flowers produced. . . . these are two factors we certainly DO NOT want to change! You may now have gathered that I will be trying to promote the concept of long-life gardens. So with your patient indulgence, let’s launch ourselves into the oft ill-understood world of the soil.
Two vital factors have governed plant development and evolution in the Cape. One is whether the soil is calcareous or not. The other is how wet the soil becomes during the rainy months and how freely it can drain. The nature of the soil is critical to our journey into the realms of indigenous gardening. So, if you know your soil, you will be able to determine to a large extent what plants it is likely to support.

Knowing your soils

If you live close to the sea, for example up the west coast, on False Bay or along the stretch from Hermanus to Cape Agulhas, all the way to Port Elizabeth, chances are your house has been built on dune sand. Coastal dunes are highly calcareous (rich in calcium, a chief component of lime) owing part of their origin to finely broken pieces of marine shell. To cap it all, dune sand is also poor in plant-important nutrients such as nitrogen and potassium, and usually possess only small amounts of organic matter (humus). Thus as you can imagine, dune soils are ill-suited for agriculture, and are difficult to ameliorate. But, as I have already said, appropriate indigenous plants have already developed the right adaptations to grow, and in fact, thrive on these soils.

If you do not live on a dune, then your soil will probably be derived from sandstone (e.g. inland of the Betty's Bay coast and many parts of the Cape Peninsula) or even granite (e.g. parts of the Cape Peninsula). These soils have an acidic reaction (low levels of calcium) but are also extremely poor in all plant-important nutrients, although granitic soils are marginally more fertile than those developed on sandstone and also are better textured.

How to tell the difference? There are two easy ways: you can examine your soil with a magnifying glass or hand lens for small fragments of marine shell. The accompanying photographs show close-up views of three different soils and demonstrate what you should see through your hand lens. Alternatively, and to be doubly sure, dilute some battery acid (nine parts water to one part acid) and see if the soil effervesces. This "highly scientific" method was demonstrated to a group of pre-school pupils in the De Hoop Nature Reserve near Bredasdorp, and they immediately coined the term "soils that fizz!" So, if your soil fizzes, it should be calcareous (for the curious, acid reacts with the shell fragments to release the gas, carbon dioxide).

Please beware of battery acid. It is highly corrosive and should be washed off with copious quantities of water if it should come into contact with your skin.

Having established the type of soil you have in your indigenous garden-to-be, ascertain what the drainage is like. If impeded, I would advise you to try and rectify the situation. It is far better to have a free-draining garden than the reverse as this allows a far wider choice of plants (more about this in the third article).

Choice of house or plot

If you are still deciding where to buy or build a home or holiday-house, and you would like to show off an exquisite indigenous garden, a site with acid soils (i.e. derived from sandstone, acid sand (many Cape Flats localities, e.g. Rondebosch, Claremont, Edgeomead) or granite) would be the most versatile. The selection and availability of attractive plants adapted to calcareous soils is far lower than for acid soils, thus allowing far less versatility. However, by the same token, do not let soil type influence your decision to such an extent that you decide on another area. I shall discuss this and other aspects of plot preparation in the third article, together with some tips on general landscaping.

Forthcoming events: October – December

As a member of a national society, your membership will earn you a warm welcome at any of the following events. As it is necessary to arrange transport in advance those wishing to attend excursions should write in good time to the Honorary Secretaries of the branch arranging the excursion.

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