

Honeybells

There's a honeybell to suit almost every garden



Freylinia lanceolata at the Kirstenbosch Botanical Garden

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Freylinia is a small genus in the African Scrophulariaceae, of which all seven species show horticultural potential. Their popular name honeybells refers to the sweetly-scented flowers usually produced in racemes at the ends of the branches. The flowers remind one of *Erica*; they are tubular and vary in colour from yellow, white, mauve, purple to reddish-purple. Honeybells are easily grown, long-lived and relatively disease-free and most species are also drought resistant. *Freylinia* was named in 1824 by Luigi Colla (1766-1848), an Italian lawyer and botanist and the owner of a botanical garden near Torino. Some *Freylinia* species have been cultivated in Europe for a considerable time.

Freylinias are mostly shrubby, although two species can attain the size of small trees. Flowering usually takes place in late winter and spring. *Freylinia* is an African genus, occurring from the tropics to the Cape Province. *Freylinia tropica* is the only species found outside of the Cape, while the other six are confined to the southern, western and eastern Cape coastal regions below the inland escarpment. One species, *Freylinia visseri*, became extinct in the wild in 1954 due to agricultural activities in the Strandveld, but was saved from total obliteration and reintroduced in 1989. *Freylinia longiflora*, also threatened with extinction, occurs in a solitary remnant fynbos patch surrounded by fruit orchards. This species has also been successfully introduced into cultivation at Kirstenbosch and will be available at the annual plant sale.

Ecologically, two groups can be distinguished. The first group consists of only two species,


Freylinia tropica and *F. lanceolata* which are confined to streambanks and other moist habitats. Both are fast growing and make excellent garden subjects, attaining the size of small trees under favourable conditions. Their tiny, wingless seeds germinate readily within three weeks. *Freylinia tropica* which occurs in the northern Transvaal and northwards into tropical Africa, is the taller of the two. Its light purplish to white flowers are produced in axillary cymes (flowering shoots with side branching) and not as in all the other species, in apical racemes (stalked flowers off a main axis). It develops into a dense rounded shrub 2.5-4 m high, which reaches its peak flowering period during spring and makes an attractive hedge.

This species is also frost-resistant and can be successfully grown in Witwatersrand gardens. *Freylinia lanceolata* is the most widespread of the Cape species, occurring from the Khamiesberg in the northwestern Cape to Grahamstown in the eastern Cape. It is probably also the most attractive and fast growing member of the genus. The flowers, produced mainly from June to August, are yellow (rarely white), sweetly scented and borne in drooping inflorescences or flowering shoots.

The second group consists of five closely related drought-resistant species confined to the western and southern Cape. They are sclerophyllous (hard-leaved) shrubs, 1-3 m tall, with winged seeds and inflorescences raised well above the small leathery leaves. *Freylinia undulata* is the most widespread, occurring mainly in renosterveld south of the Langeberg range, but with outliers in the Cederberg. It is a variable shrub about 1 m tall, producing attractive purple flowers from July to October. Its spindly growth habit is not as appealing as that of the other species but *F. undulata* is a useful shrub for dry, winter rainfall gardens.

Freylinia longiflora is a very

rare fynbos endemic of the Elgin district, where its only surviving population occurs on an island among fruit orchards. It is a small shrub up to 1 m tall, producing white or cream flowers during the spring. It should preferably be pruned in late summer as the plants tend to get untidy. In its natural habitat it is subject to occasional burning. *Freylinia densiflorus* is the most variable species in the genus, and occurs widely in dry fynbos on the southern Cape mountains. It is a shrub 1.5-2 m high (often rounded) with attractive light purplish flowers. The remaining two species appear to be restricted endemics. As mentioned above, *Freylinia visseri* became extinct in the Velddrift district due to agricultural activities (Van Jaarsveld & Duncan 1983). An erect stoloniferous (with runners), multi-stemmed shrub up to 3 m high, it produces purple tubular flowers in spring and is ideal for windy, coastal gardens, being easily propagated from cuttings or stolons. *Freylinia crispa*, the seventh and last species, has only recently been described. It is an erect, sparsely-branched, virgate shrub up to 2.5 m high, producing attractive, slightly pendulous reddish-purple flowers during the winter and spring. Both this species and *F. visseri* are pollinated by birds. Sunbirds have also occasionally been observed on *F. undulata*. However, the small flowers of the latter suggest insects as their main pollination agents.

Freylinias can be cultivated from stem cuttings preferably taken during the warmer summer months. Plants provided with a dry, sunny slope grow rapidly and may flower within one season. They can also be grown in containers. 

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References

- Van Jaarsveld, E.J. & Duncan, G.D. (1983.)
Freylinia visseri. *Veld & Flora* 69(1),
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