

ROSAMUND FELSEN GALLERY

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Gardening with Australian and South African plants create a textured layer of artistic looks

By Joshua Siskin



Grevillea 'Long John.'

I was recently privileged to visit the garden of Lavi Daniel in Cheviot Hills. Daniel has aesthetically assembled an astonishing collection of Australian and South African native plants.

A studio artist accustomed to applying paint to canvas, Daniel has creatively combined trees, shrubs and ground covers to create a memorable floral and foliar quilt that wraps around his house. Having examined some of his current artistic renderings, it would appear that there is a symbiotic relationship — or perhaps I should say cross-pollination — between his horticultural design and graphic art. At least one

of his paintings conjures up the image of a kaleidoscopic, if not yet hybridized, grevillea flower.

We are accustomed to demanding floral gratification from our plants, yet many Australian and South African natives could make a strong case for foliar focus in the garden. Blue pearl bush (*Maireana sedifolia*) is an excellent example of this. Silvery blue, roundish leaves are held tightly along the stem. Blue pearl bush is a tough plant, capable of handling most soil types and accepting full sun to partial shade, depending on how hot your summer waxes. It is also tolerant of cold temperatures down to 20 degrees.

Eucalyptus is probably the best known Australian genus of plants and it has many outstanding representatives with baby blue to silvery foliage. In Daniel's garden, a young *Eucalyptus macrocarpa* is showing its chalky white leaves, while a *Eucalyptus kruseana* displays blue-gray shish kebab foliage along with golden yellow flowers.

Daniel has a fondness for burgundy bronze foliage too, as is evidenced in his recently planted *Leucadendron* 'Burgundy,' as well as in a mature, arching burgundy-copper peppermint tree (*Agonis flexuosa* 'Jervis Bay Afterdark'). The yellow, orange, pink and red variegation in the leaves and bracts of his *Leucadendron* 'Jester' is a pleasant surprise.

When it comes to tactile attraction, the woollybushes (*Adenanthos* spp.) have no comparison. Furry foliage covers these plants, which include ground cover, shrub and arboreal species. *Banksia* flowers, large and prickly, offer a textural contrast.

Of all the plants in Daniel's garden, the one making the deepest impression on me was *Acacia cognata* 'Cousin Itt.' This charming, mounding ground cover will undulate its way through a garden bed if not beyond. I immediately wondered if 'Cousin Itt' might be used as a lawn substitute under certain circumstances — not as a surface upon which to play croquet, but simply as a drought-tolerant expanse of green.

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Here, a short lesson in horticultural nomenclature and geobotany is in order:

Virtually all of Daniel's plants belong to the Protea family. Protean means changeable or capable of many different forms and, based on both floral and foliar variation among his plants, it is eminently understandable how their family name came about. The principal garden-worthy Proteas native to Australia include Banksia, Grevillea and Hakea genera, while the Leucadendron and Leucospermum genera are indigenous to South Africa.

As for trees, Eucalyptus are native strictly to Australia, while Acacias, while drought tolerant in the garden, are indigenous to both wet and dry climate regions around the globe, from Australia to Africa to the American Southwest. Acacias also appear in shrub and ground cover forms.

Daniel was intent on artistically matching, layering and contrasting his plants, not only with one another, but with existing hardscape as well. In one whimsical flourish, he decided to plant a Grevillea 'Magic Lantern' above a red street curb, the plant's flower color perfectly matching the paint on the curb.

Daniel brought my attention to the fact that the familiar garden ornamental known as pink breath of heaven or Diosma (Coleonema pulchrum), a South African native, emits a fragrance when you brush against its leaves. I had always wondered about the breath of heaven label since its flowers have no scent. The key to appreciation of this species is to plant it, as Daniel has done, along a pathway so that each time you walk by you brush against its foliage and imbibe its delicate perfume.

While touring his garden, Daniel kept mentioning Jo O'Connell, from whose nursery he procures both his plants and the mulch he uses in his garden. With Australian and South African natives, proper mulching is key to maintaining a steady diet of available minerals since any sort of conventional fertilizer should not be applied. These plants require a slow, steady feed of decomposing compost and humus.

Australian soil is low in phosphorus and South African soil is low in both phosphorus and potassium, so standard fertilizers, which contain these elements, would be counterproductive. O'Connell recommends two products — Garden Humus and ES-2 — that are available through Agromin (www.agromin.com), a mulch and soil amendment company in Oxnard.

Aside from annual mulching, Daniel waters his plants with conventional spray sprinklers once a week, and occasionally twice a week during very hot weather.

O'Connell has a nursery (www.australianplants.com) near Ojai. She grows hundreds of species that neither you nor I have ever seen. Go to her website and you will quickly appreciate the vast cornucopia of treasures to be found among Australian and South African plants. Her nursery is open to the public, but you must make an appointment if you wish to pay a visit. Contact her at 800-701-6517.

To learn more about local plants and gardens, visit Joshua Siskin's website at www.thesmartergardener.com. Send questions, comments, garden experiences and photos to joshua@perfectplants.com.