

Gardening with Aloes

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I have recently taken a step back from my garden in Harare and noticed that while I have a large number of aloes, they are planted merely as a “collection”. As the saying goes, ‘you can’t see the wood for the trees’. This realisation galvanised a concerted effort on my behalf, to start GARDENING with aloes, and not simply to collect them. I’ve spent hours sitting in my garden, researching and planning, and then getting up to the armpits in soil and sand, with the happy scars of the unrelenting attacks of aloe teeth as they have been relocated into groups, colours, pots and structural positions.

Aloes are found in public and private gardens throughout the world. More than 500 pure species have so far been described, with more being found every year, mainly in Africa. The largest concentrations are in South Africa, Kenya, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Botswana and Tanzania, but also in Madagascar and the Arabian Peninsula. There are currently 31 aloes described, that occur in Zimbabwe (the most recent excitement that has had aloe enthusiasts in Zim all abuzz, has arisen from the describing of aloe haroniensis in July 2014, by Tom McCoy, Darrel Plowes and Obety Baptista.) With this variety of plants, there is a bounty of choices for your garden; tree aloes, shrubby or creeping aloes, stemmed aloes, dwarf aloes, stemless aloes, grass aloes, hybrid aloes and more.

SOME TIPS FOR STARTING UP YOUR ALOE GARDEN:

- Aloes in general, prefer sunny, hot conditions, with lots of light. With only a few exceptions, they are most obliging and will adapt to different conditions (especially if grown from seed.)
- Aloes need exceptionally good drainage – they are happiest in a mixture of river sand, humus-rich soil/compost, and some well-aged kraal manure. Try to emulate their natural environment, whether it is amongst rocks, on a slope, under light foliage, or on wide grassy plains.
- Do not over water your aloes – they are water wise, low maintenance plants – they will thrive on tough love! (However, should you be planting species like aloe inyangensis and others from the Nyanga region, these will naturally benefit from conditions similar to their natural rainfall.)
- Aloes provide broad splashes of colour in your winter garden, when little else is willing to flower.
- Find a large and lovely specimen, preferably during the flowering season to avoid those surprises 6 months later. When planting this in your garden, wedge it in-between some rocks to avoid it falling over!
- Branching aloes may be propagated with ease by simply breaking a piece off, allowing it to scar, and then placing in a sand-loam mixture to root.



Aloe barbarae

- Do not buy aloes from the side of the road, these have more than likely been removed from natural habitats, and supporting this activity will result in surely the degradation if not loss of natural colonies. Aloes are also protected in the wild, so either grow your aloes from seed, or purchase from a reliable supplier at the bi-annual Aloe, Cactus & Succulent Society of Zimbabwe’s Plant Sales.
- Several of the maculate (spotted leaf) aloes produce runners, you are sure to be able to beg a few off a friend.
- If possible, plant your aloes together in groups of 3 or 5 (or any odd number) to show off these magnificent plants. Individual plants tend to get lost and can’t be appreciated in their full splendour.
- To establish your new garden you may need to water regularly initially, but these are notoriously water-wise plants, and the rule of thumb is to err on the side of too little water, while attempting to emulate the application of water during their particular growing season.
- Mulching over the dry months is a worthy exercise.
- Keep an eye out for pests and disease and consult your nursery for environmentally friendly solutions to any outbreak.
- Keep in touch with all the experts at the ACSSZ for tips and invaluable advice.

Here are SOME aloes that are popular for the garden, most of which can be found for sale at the Aloe, Cactus & Succulent Society's Plant Sales or from aloë enthusiasts:

TREE ALOES:

These make a striking statement as a focal plant in the garden. **Aloe barbaraë**, the tree aloe (also described as *A. bainesii* after the artist Thomas Baines who first documented it in 1873), can grow into a large tree with a height of 8m and spread of 6m (pruning can control this should your garden not accommodate such grandeur.)

Aloe plicatilis, the fan aloe, is native to the Western Cape (a visit to La Motte wine estate is a treat in winter, as you will be able to witness the splendour of this plant in its natural habitat.) It will need some care and attention in Harare, with our summer rainfall, especially watching for water-stress during the dry months. It is not readily available here in Zimbabwe, however, can be grown from seed and will grow up to 3m x 3m.



Aloe plicatilis (photograph: Esculapio)

Aloe dichotoma, the quiver tree, is native to Namibia and unfortunately, does not hold much success of survival in our climate. If you are brave, perhaps trying to grow it in a container that can be sheltered, may yield some success!

STEMMED ALOES:

Single stemmed aloes are striking plants that can provide vertical focal points or architecture to your garden.



Aloe marlothii

Aloe marlothii, the mountain aloe, is tolerant although slow growing. It boasts bright orange or yellow flowers on candelabras that curve outwards, almost horizontally. Anyone driving up Christmas Pass on the way to Mutare, will witness the splendour of these aloes in full bloom in winter.



Aloe marlothii

Aloe ferox, the bitter aloe from the Cape, is famous for its medicinal uses. It grows to 3m and is frost-hardy, blooming from May to August with scarlet orange flowers, oozing nectar.



Aloe excelsa

Aloe excelsa, the Zimbabwean tree aloe (well-known for the elevated, soldier-like specimens guarding the Great Zimbabwe Ruins), are tall, reaching up to 9m, with dull green, teathy leaves. The flowers grow candelabra-like, with colours varying from orange-red to a deep crimson, or even true orange. They will need a well-drained, frost-free site.

Aloe pretoriensis, the Pretoria aloe, a medium sized, indigenous aloe to Zimbabwe, is a truly beautiful plant, boasting tall, pink flowers with a characteristic bloom which is most marked on the unopened, bluish tinted buds.

It grows very well and flowers regularly when cultivated in Harare. Flowering is generally in June – July. When it is away from its habitat of the Eastern Districts, it will benefit from a good soaking once in a while.



Aloe pretoriensis

Aloe speciosa, the tilthead aloe from South Africa, bears a unique inflorescence echoing its name speciosa, meaning “showy”. It is adaptable, with red/pink blooms which change colour to the palest green.



Aloe speciosa (photograph: Abu Shawka)

MULTI-STEMMED, SHRUBBY ALOES:

A great number of popular garden aloes are multi-stemmed from ground level and grow into medium sized ‘shrubs’ that may be used for large borders, focal points of block planting, or even informal hedging.

Aloe arborescens, the krantz aloe, is a garden favourite, happiest in full sun, but tolerant of semi-shade. The birds adore its sweet nectar. Flowers vary from salmon to yellow or bright orange. It can grow as high and wide as 2-3m.



Aloe arborescens

Aloe spicata, formerly known as aloe sessiliflora, the bottle brush aloe, requires a frost-free, well drained and protected corner of your garden. It is an arborescent aloe with long spikes of closely packed, greenish-yellow to golden-yellow flowers. It is found in South Africa and just into south-east Zimbabwe, normally on steep rocky hillsides.

Aloe cameronii and its lovely coppery red leaves, is found in shallow soil pockets on granite rocks in Zimbabwe. It is a handsome species to grow and is striking with bright scarlet cylindrical blooms. Overwatering is likely to result in an unwanted metamorphosis from magnificent dark red to greener leaves.

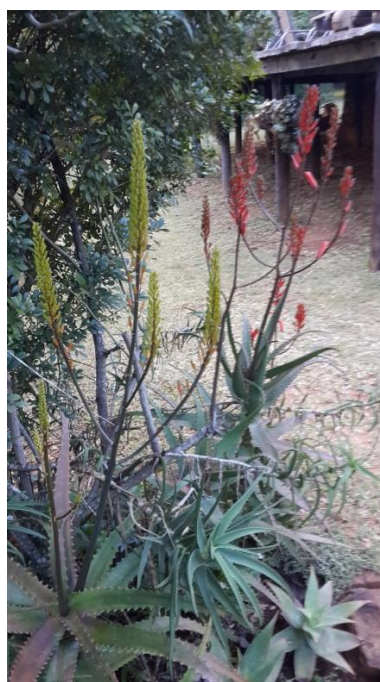


Aloe cameronii var. *bondana*

Aloe vanbalenii, van Balen’s aloe, is renowned for its magnificent display in June at Ewanrigg Botanic Gardens. Its stemless leaves crawl close to the earth and are a painter’s palette of olive green with reddish tint. The flower heads are a winter winner in a rockery or steep, dry slope, and range from a strong yellow, to soft orange-red.



Aloe vanbalenii



Aloe dawei

Aloe dawei, originating in Uganda, is a truly rewarding plant that thrives in Zimbabwe. It grows into a flourishing mass of colour with the unusual reward of flowering more than twice a year. The inflorescence is branched with magnificent scarlet flowers. Occasionally, a yellow flowered plant may be encountered. It is a valuable plant which will keep on sending out suckers – free plants for your garden and friends!

CREEPING OR RAMBLING ALOES:

Slender stems result in these plants creeping and spreading growth. Leaves tend to be widely spaced, so are not as dominant in a garden.

Aloe ciliaris, the climbing aloe, lives in thick vegetation in the Eastern Cape, and uses shrubs as support to climb up toward the light. It will flower in semi-shade, but must have support. The blooms are bright red with delightful yellow tips and it may be generous enough to flower year around. It is easily identified by the beardlike cilia on the leaf sheath. Keep away from frosty areas.



Aloe ciliaris (photograph: Michael Wolf)

Aloe striatula, the Basuto kraal aloe, is a straggling shrub of approximately 1m x 1m. It can disappoint and not flower as prolifically as you would hope, but provides semi-glossy green leaves and can form a large shrub.



Aloe striatula (photograph: Stan Shebs)

Aloe tenuior, the fence aloe, is an elegant shrubby aloe, with either slender yellow flowers or red with yellow tips. It will show off in winter and also flower intermittently throughout the remainder of the year. It may need some support as it grows leggy with age.



Aloe tenuior (yellow)

STEMLESS ALOES:

There are a number of stemless aloes that grow close to the ground. They are ideal for borders or rockeries and are best planted en masse to accomplish maximum impact.

Aloe chabaudii, the Dwala aloe, is probably the best known aloe with the widest distribution around Zimbabwe. It makes a wonderful garden plant that will light up any winter garden with masses of coral red (and occasionally yellow or orange) flowers on tall stems. It is a relatively small aloe and is not very tolerant of frost.



Aloe chabaudii (photograph: Rob Jarvis)



Aloe chabaudii (yellow)

Aloe globuligemma, the Witchdoctor's Aloe, unlike many other Aloes, is a poisonous species. It is easily cultivated from seed or suckers, and prospers in frost-free areas. Its globular buds turn upwards and towards the base of the branch, heroically displaying long, sulphur-yellow to ivory flowers, tinged reddish towards the base.



GRASS ALOES:

Grass Aloes are stemless, usually with minute, crowded teeth on their leaves. They are well suited to the eastern districts, out of the reach of fire, and can be encouraged to grow in Harare.

Aloe inyangensis, the Nyanga aloe, enjoys a cool climate with much rain and mist during the summer months. It is a delightful plant in the garden, boasting vermillion red green-tipped flowers. It grows rapidly, preferring full sunlight and water. Propagation is simple by division.



Aloe inyangensis

HYBRID ALOES:

Hybrid aloes are robust and easily grown plants with very showy inflorescences and there are a large number of these circulating and increasing the popularity of aloes in the garden. You may have had the privilege of seeing some of the fabulous hybrids at the home of Brian and Barbara Terry - one of the annual ACSSZ outings that should not be missed!

A popular hybrid aloe seen in several gardens in Zimbabwe, is the **Aloe hedgehog**. This reliable species is a small formed spreading aloe, with blue-green leaves, which flowers several times a year with a magnificent display. Make sure you plant this in full sun.



INDIGENOUS ALOES FOR GARDENING:

List of recommended indigenous, Zimbabwean Aloes for Cultivation (from Aloes of Zimbabwe – Oliver West):

Aloe cameronii	very adaptable
Aloe excelsa	very adaptable
Aloe chabaudii	very adaptable
Aloe spicata	very adaptable
Aloe globuligemma	very adaptable
Aloe inyangensis	unsuitable for lowveld
Aloe munchii	unsuitable for lowveld
Aloe collina	unsuitable for lowveld
Aloe arborescens	unsuitable for lowveld
Aloe pretoriensis	unsuitable for lowveld
Aloe musapana	marginal for lowveld
Aloe ballii	marginal for lowveld
Aloe swynnertonii	marginal for lowveld
Aloe littoralis	black spot in high rainfall
Aloe tauri	black spot in high rainfall
Aloe aculeata	black spot in high rainfall
Aloe cryptopoda	very prone to black spot
Aloe lutescens	very prone to black spot