

# fussy NATIVES

Most native plants are incredibly tough because they've evolved to survive the extremes of Australia's climate. However, there are a few that need a little extra attention to flower well in the garden

**G**rowing native plants, especially ones local to your area, is usually easy, but many gardeners hanker for flowering fussy spots that need a little more care. It's a combination of desire for their striking beauty and the challenge they present. We've all had occasional failures, plants that appear to die overnight or pathetic struggling specimens that attract every plant pest and disease. However, when armed with the right information, everyone can have success with natives.

The number-one rule when choosing Australian plants is to find out their area of origin. If you live in a damp area of Tasmania, a specimen from the central desert is unlikely to thrive. Likewise, gardeners in humid areas will find many plants from south-west Western Australia's Mediterranean climate a real challenge. If you want a beautiful garden with minimum hassle, use endemic natives or ones from a similar climate and soil type. They will grow well and provide food and shelter that will suit native fauna. They are also adapted to local rainfall so, once established, can survive without additional water.

Australian plants grow in a range of soils, the two extremes being clay and sand. Gardeners also need to be aware of the soil pH. While soil structure can be amended using organic matter (and gypsum in the case of most clays), it's much harder to make big changes to soil pH. Although the addition of organic matter will act as a buffer, it's generally better to simply accept your soil's pH and find plants that thrive in these conditions.

## secrets to success

If your heart is set on having a plant from another climate or soil zone, or you've ended up with one through a gift or impulse buy (and who hasn't?), then the use of pots, raised beds and a little tender loving care will increase your chances of success. Containers with plenty of holes in the bottom filled with native potting mix allow perfect drainage, and techniques such as using gravel mulch in humid areas will help to reduce the moisture level around sensitive, dry-climate plants.

One of the most fickle Australian plants is the beautiful brown boronia (*Boronia megastigma*), which is short-lived in the wild. It likes a cool, moist, well-drained soil with mulch in dappled shade. I've had success using self-watering pots, which allow ample access to water without waterlogging.

Potting mixes designed for Australian plants contain little or no phosphorous and are ideal for natives. Many Australian plants, especially those in the Proteaceae family, have developed in soil with very little phosphorous and won't tolerate it in their growing medium. Slow-release fertiliser that is also low in phosphorous is recommended for these plants, such as the fussy black kangaroo paw (*Macropidia fuliginosa*). It likes the sun but does not like to dry out, especially in hot weather or when in bud or flower. It's best grown in a sunny spot in a pot to deal with its dislike of waterlogging, humidity, frost and nutritional imbalances. Its susceptibility to ink spot and rust diseases make it a very particular perennial that is best treated as an annual. ▶

PHOTOS LEIGH CLAPP (MAIN PIC)/ALAMY (SCAEVOLA AEMULA)



## DELICATE LOCALS

Left Pink *Chamelaucium* teams with pale yellow pimelia here to create a pretty picture.



## growing tips for five finicky natives

### 1. Scaevola

*Scaevola* has about 130 species of mostly herbaceous shrubs, with just 35 occurring outside Australia. Commonly known as fanflower, the flowers are generally purple, mauve or white. The most popular species is the small mounding or groundcover *S. aemula*, from New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia, which has big flowers and many hybrids, including 'Purple Fanfare'. Tougher is the smaller-flowered *S. Albida* groundcover, which is resistant to salt spray. About 30 species, including *S. Caliptera*, come from Western Australia and do not do well with humidity.

- Needs good drainage and full sun.
- Take cuttings during the growing season.
- Trim back after flowering.
- Many, especially big-flowered varieties, die suddenly after flowering.
- Most species are frost-sensitive.

## growing success



Boronia

### 2. Boronia

*Boronia* is renowned for spectacular perfumed flowers and aromatic foliage. Its 100 species are found all over Australia. While varieties such as the aniseed boronia (*B. crenulata*) are easy to grow, the most revered is the fussy, short-lived and heavenly scented brown boronia (*B. megastigma*). It's from south-west Western Australia, where the soil is moist. Hybrids include 'Purple Jared' (*B. megastigma* x *B. heterophylla*).

**Tips** ■ Needs well-draining soil with a high organic content. ■ Likes summer water; soil should not dry out. ■ Prefers a sheltered spot in sun or semi-shade. ■ Apply mulch to protect roots from heat. ■ Prune by one third after flowering. ■ Look for grafted plants. ■ Needs a cool winter for flowering. ■ Grow brown boronia (*B. megastigma*) in a self-watering pot.



Chamelaucium

### 3. Chamelaucium

There are 31 species of *Chamelaucium*, all endemic to south-west Western Australia, which has dry summers and wet winters. Known as waxes, the plants are 30cm to 5m high with needle-like leaves. They flower from winter to summer. Many are unreliable in areas with humid summers. The most adaptable species is Geraldton wax (*Chamelaucium uncinatum*), which is good for cut flowers and landscaping.

**Tips** ■ Likes free-draining alkaline or neutral soils. ■ Sun to light-shade positions. ■ Prune (green foliage only) after flowering and again in mid-summer. ■ Dislikes overhead watering. ■ Will die 'overnight' in unfavourable conditions. ■ Sensitive to die back (*Phytophthora* spp.). ■ In humid areas, buy species grafted onto *C. uncinatum*.

### 4. Leschenaultia

*Leschenaultia* has more than 30 species of small, short-lived plants from Australia – all but three are from south-west Western Australia. They're celebrated for their vibrant, coloured flowers, such as those on the blue leschenaultia (*L. biloba*), which is a particularly popular variety. The annual species, biennial species and hybrids are best in a pot.

**Tips** ■ Needs perfect drainage to prevent root disease. ■ Garden beds must have sandy loam soil or gravel beds over sand. ■ For containers, use one-third sand, two-thirds potting mix. ■ Semi-shade to full sun. ■ Dislikes overhead watering and humidity. ■ Soil must dry out between waterings. ■ Trim lightly through summer to maximise flower production.



Leschenaultia



Eremophila

### 5. Eremophila

*Eremophila*, known as emu bush, has more than 240 species, mostly from dry inland and arid areas of the mainland. These shrubs, groundcovers and small trees tolerate frost and drought. The tubular flowers have distinctive upper and lower lips. Most do not like wet conditions or heavy soils, but more tolerant varieties include shrubs *E. maculata* 'Pink Passion' and 'Lemon Delight', and groundcovers *E. glabra* 'Kalbarri Carpet' and 'Amber Carpet'. Graft *E. abietina*, *E. cuneifolia* and *E. nivea* onto *Myoporum* in high rainfall and humid areas.

**Tips** ■ Provide well-draining soil with pH above 6. Build up clay soil by 30–50cm. ■ Prune by one third after flowering. ■ Avoid species with hairy foliage in humid climates. ■ Likes open position with full sun. ■ Dislikes overhead watering. GA