



Shape, colour, form and textural contrast. Landscape designer Franchesca Watson looks at the most striking leaf ensembles to ensure year-round interest in the garden

FOLIAGE *first*



I KNOW THAT I AM ALWAYS banging on about plant selection, but I do consider it one of the absolute sink-or-swim elements of good garden design. With the planet's connectivity revolution, and the increased awareness and availability of garden design as part of good design overall, comes a required sophistication that previous generations of gardeners did not need. **It's just not okay to put all one's favourite plants together haphazardly, or to have flowering plants chosen on the basis of their blooms alone.**

The result will always be raggle-taggle (unless that's what you want, of course). The most important thing about a plant, after all, is its foliage (most flower only once a year) and the way it presents its foliage – its total growth habit – is vital.

When you really look at plant leaves, you will start to see that some leaves have extraordinary shapes, and that the plant presents them in a unique way, which usually creates a certain pattern. It is this patterning that creates the overall effect of the plant and one should seek to combine it with another plant/plants that have a complementary pattern. **The most obvious way of doing this is with leaves that are large and bold, combined with leaves that are finely textured – this approach will work every time.** But there are many other ways: an upright-leaved plant with a tumbling plant; a spear-shaped large leaf with a round large leaf, for example: arums with *Luculia*; lance-shaped leaves of varying thicknesses, such as *Kniphofia*, with restios.

Colour is also vitally important and can be contrasting or similar. **Greens that are very similar will not work well together unless the leaf shapes are completely contrasting.** I am very careful about how I combine grey-leaved plants with bright greens – I think greys are better with dark greens or at least



greens with minimal yellow tones. The most exciting combination I saw at Kirstenbosch recently was a planting of *Metalasia*, *Stoebe plumosa*, *Eriocephalus africana*, *renosterbos* and a grey bushy *Mesembryanthemum*. All had fine textures of fairly similar greys, but completely different leaf presentation and patterning. Breathtaking. **I also have a great combination going in the rooftop garden outside my office, which uses greys – *Convolvulus cneorum*, *Euphorbia wulfenii* and *Cotyledon orbiculata* 'Fire Sticks' – with *Lotus berlothii* as the tumbling element.** This season I am going to add *Agave attenuata*, *Echeveria metallica* and *Oscularia deltoides*, and maybe some *Sedum spectabile* 'Autumn Joy' – all very strong on leaf patterning, the link between them being that they are all shades of soft grey-green. ■ *Franchesca Watson* www.franchescawatson.com

ABOVE GARDENIA THUNBERGII IN THE BACKGROUND WITH A FOREGROUND OF ARCTOTIS PICKING UP THE PALE COLOUR OF THE GARDENIA SEED PODS **LEFT** STRELITZIA JUNCEA IN THE BACKGROUND PROVIDING A STRONG VERTICAL ELEMENT, WITH PELARGONIUM GRAVEOLENS X

RADENS AS A SOFTER CONTRAST IN THE FOREGROUND **BELOW** ALOE ARBORESCENS AT THE BACK, WITH METALASIA MURICATA, RENOSTERBOS, ERIOCEPHALUS AFRICANA AND A GREY MESEMBRYANTHEMUM IN THE FRONT – ALL LINKED BY THE COLOUR TONES



TREE SELECTION Remember to continue these ideas when selecting trees. Tree foliage forms the cornerstone of any garden; it can be used as backdrop for planting combinations or as focal point. What about *PODOCARPUS FALCATUS* (fine-leaved yellowwood) with *BRACHYLAENA DISCOLOR*, *SPARMANNIA AFRICANA* with *VEPRIS UNDULATA* or *SYZYGIIUM CORDATUM* (waterbessie) with *PROTORHUS*.