Felicia amelloides | Plantz Africa

Introduction

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Felicia amelloides catches the eye wherever it is planted, with its striking sky-blue and sunny yellow flowerheads, held well above the leaves. South Africa has been blessed with many felicias, several of which make excellent garden plants. This species is one of the best. Apart from its beauty, this plant has many advantages. It is hardy, fast growing, long-flowering and long-lived, more or less frost- and wind-resistant, needs only moderate water and little care. It is also readily available from nurseries. As blue is a difficult colour to get into a garden, this is definitely a plant that will draw attention.

Description

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This felicia is usually a perennial, evergreen shrublet, about 0.3-0.6 x 0.5 m but it can be up to 1 m high. It is densely branched and frequently has dark reddish stems. The plant often feels like fine sandpaper because of tiny, stiff hairs on the stems and leaves. The leaves are opposite and more or less elliptical, dark green above and light green below. (A cultivar, *cv. variegata*, with variegated green and white leaves is also available.)
The flowerheads are typical of the *Asteraceae* and are about 30 mm in diameter and are borne on naked stalks up to 180 mm long. Unlike many daisies, these do not close at night. Inside the green involucre (bracts surrounding base of flowerhead), each head has about 12 female ray florets that are sky-blue, or rarely mauve (white-flowered and pale blue forms are now offered by nurseries). In the centre there are numerous yellow, bisexual disc florets. All florets have a pappus of a single ring of many stiff, white bristles. The fruits, called achenes, are darkish brown and minutely hairy. Each fruit is shed together with its pappus that acts like a parachute.

![Flowerhead](image1)

The natural time of flowering is a little uncertain as Goldblatt & Manning (2000) give it as mainly October to February, while specimens in the National Herbarium are dated from March to December, with most in September. In Pretoria gardens they flower almost throughout the year, with most flowers in spring and early summer. They live a long time, usually at least five years, under normal conditions.

**Conservation Status**

**Status**

There appears to be no major threat to the survival of *F. amelloides* in the wild at present. However, the coastal areas it occupies are increasingly being threatened by holiday homes and other developments. Hence the status may change. Fortunately it is common in horticulture in South Africa and is also grown in Europe.

**Distribution and habitat**

**Distribution description**

This species comes from the coastal strip of both the Western and Eastern Cape Provinces, mainly from Humansdorp to Port Alfred. It has been recorded from as far west as the De Hoop-Potberg Nature Reserve and it reaches the Kei River mouth to the east. The furthest inland it extends seems to be to the
Vanstadiensberg and Winterhoek Mountains near Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage, and the Ecca Pass, near Grahamstown. For a long time it was thought that this felicia occurs in the Cape Peninsula. This was because of confusion with other species such as *F. aethiopica*, which has closely similar flowers but alternate leaves. The habitat of *F. amelloides* ranges in altitude from 0-1000 m.

This felicia is mainly found on old coastal sand dunes that are beginning to stabilize, or where dunes meet permanent bush or where there is any shelter. It is also found on sandy flats, exposed stony hillsides, gravelly slopes, outcrops of Table Mountain Sandstone and on rock slabs. The associated vegetation has been described as fynbos (sometimes called macchia), transition fynbos/bush, coastal scrub, thick scrub, ericoid vegetation and *Stoebe plumosa* communities.

The blue felicia bush receives some rain all year round in much of its natural area and endures a wide range of temperatures, including some frost. It does not seem to need the regular coastal mists as it grows well in inland gardens. With this natural distribution and habitat, it could be grown in many parts of South Africa, except, perhaps, where there is very high rainfall and heavy frost. Good drainage and some shelter would probably overcome these problems.

**Derivation of name and historical aspects**

**History**

The genus *Felicia* Cass. was named by A.H.G. de Cassini in 1818 after Felix, a German official at Regensburg who died in 1846. *F. amelloides* was first named *Cineraria amelloides* by Linnaeus in 1763. Andreas Voss (1857-1924), a German author on horticulture, botanical nomenclature and meteorology, made the combination *Felicia amelloides* in 1894. The specific name *amelloides* means it looks like *Amellus*, a closely similar genus also found in the Western and Eastern Cape. Within the family Asteraceae, or daisy family, these two genera are placed in the tribe Astereae which includes *Aster*, *Conyza* (fleabanes), *Erigeron* (exotic garden escape), *Chrysocoma* (bitterbos) and *Pteronia* (including *biltongbos*). There has been much controversy as to whether *Felicia* should be separated from *Aster*, but they are currently regarded as distinct genera. This is mainly because of differences in the fruit. *Felicia* is centred in southern Africa but it ranges as far north as Arabia. There are about 84 species of which about 79 occur in southern Africa. Most are found in the Cape provinces of South Africa.

The blue felicia bush was introduced to Europe in the middle of the eighteenth century and hence was one of the first species used in horticulture. Several others are now grown in gardens, for example *F. australis* (blue Karoo daisy), *F. bergeriana* (kingfisher daisy), *F. echinata* (prickly felicia) and *F. heterophylla* (true-blue daisy). The one most recently described, *F. josephinæ*, an annual from the west coast near Lambert’s Bay, has strikingly different colouring. It has white to cream-coloured ray florets and deep purple disc florets and appears to have much horticultural potential.

**Ecology**

Felicias are visited by bees and small flying insects, such as wasps and butterflies. They also have tiny
thrips running around the florets, usually carrying pollen grains on their bodies. Sometimes a bright yellow ‘flower’ spider lurks in the daisy’s centre, matching the disc florets perfectly. Whatever animal achieves pollination, it is generally very successful as full heads of seed are the norm. The involucre opens outwards in an old flower so the achenes are completely exposed. They readily become detached and float away on even a slight breeze by means of the pappus. Two felicias, \textit{F. filifolia} (draaibos) and \textit{F. muricata} (bloublommie-karoo) are among the hosts of a parasite, \textit{Thesium namaquense} (poison bush). This causes stock poisoning, mainly in sheep, in the Northern and Eastern Cape.

![Image of Felicia amelloides](http://pza.sanbi.org/felicia-amelloides)

### Uses

\textit{Felicia amelloides} can be seen on one of our South African stamps. It is used mainly as an ornamental plant; because of its ability to live in sandy areas, it can help to stabilize sand dunes, albeit not as a pioneer.

### Growing Felicia amelloides

There are many uses for this felicia in the garden. It makes a good rockery plant or can be placed in a herbaceous border with other perennials or a mixture of annuals and perennials. It could form the front of a shrub border or be used in a large window box or planter. It can be planted singly and left free to form a low bush. Alternatively, a line of plants can make a low, informal hedge or it can be clipped to make an unusual formal one.

The place should preferably be sunny but it will flower if planted as a groundcover in light shade under trees or in small beds making a blue collar around tree trunks. It needs a light, sandy or gravelly soil with good drainage and much compost if possible. Give a dressing of fertilizer for flowering plants (with ratio of N:P:K = 3:1:5) or a general fertilizer (ratio of 2:3:2) and mix some super phosphate into the soil. Water it regularly, but moderately, especially during the dry season.

Propagate by seed or cuttings in spring (August and September). The latter method is quicker and the resultant plants should flower in about a year.

For cuttings (A. Eissell pers. comm.), select nonflowering stems and cut them just below a node. Strip off
most leaves and side shoots, leaving a couple of upper ones. Place the stems in damp sand or a 1:1 mixture of fine pine bark or small polystyrene balls and sand. Cover them with a plastic bag or clear, cold drink bottle to help keep them moist. Removal of a small, vertical strip of skin will improve water absorption. Shorten the time for rooting by using rooting powder but take care not to use too much as it can burn the stems. Dip dry stems in the powder and tap off any excess before putting them in sand.

Established plants often self-seed easily so seedlings may be found nearby or at quite a distance. These can be transplanted to a new position.

Once established, this felicia is quick growing and can look good for many years. When young, it can be made to bush well if the main shoots are pinched out. Light pruning during the summer will encourage more crops of flowers. To improve appearance, cut off the many old flowers. After about three years, it may need to be cut back if it gets straggly. If it becomes frost-damaged, it will usually resprout and flower a little later than usual. The same holds for plants that survive trampling and excavations by lizard-hunting dogs! It does not seem to suffer from pests very much, making it even more carefree for the gardener.

There are many possible indigenous companion plants, with roughly similar cultivation needs. The choice will depend on the colour scheme, position of planting, plant availability and type of plants wanted - perennials or a mixture including annuals. Check flowering times to get flowers throughout the year. It would be wise, too, to use plants suited to the local rainfall pattern, although this is not essential. In a sunny place, the selection could include *Geranium incanum* (carpet geranium), *Hemizygia transvaalensis* (pink salvia), *Nylandtia spinosa* (tortoise berry), *Pelargonium crispum* (crispy-leaved pelargonium) or *P. reniforme* (kidney-leaved pelargonium) and *Scabiosa africana* (pincushion). In semishade one could use *Crassula multicava* (fairy crassula), *Hypoestes aristata* (ribbon bush) and *Veltheimia bracteata* (bush lily). This felicia could make an effective base for *Strelitzia reginae* (crane flower) in semishade or sun.

A lovely contrast can be achieved by mixing plants with different leaf types. The blue felicia bush goes well with bulbs like *Agapanthus*, *Bulbine frutescens* (stalked bulbine), *Eucomis autumnalis* (pineapple flower), *Hypoxis hemerocallidea* (star flower or African potato) and *Watsonia*. Another type of contrast, much used in the Pretoria NBG, is the inclusion of grey or whitish-leaved plants among the green ones. They have a cooling effect and look good in all seasons. (They are mostly from dryer areas, so one would have to watch the amount of water or have very good drainage.) Examples are *Gazania rigens* (trailing gazania), *Helichrysum argyrophyllum* (everlasting), *H. splendidum* (Cape gold) and *Ursinia sericea* (lace-leaf ursinia). The darker leaved *Euryops pectinatus* (grey euryops) would also give an interesting contrast. It
flowers mostly in winter.

A grouping of various daisies is also attractive and friendly looking. Plants such as *Cotula* spp. (= *Cenia*), *Dimorphotheca ecklonis* (blue-and-white daisy bush = *Osteospermum ecklonis*), *D. jucunda* (bergbitou = *O. jucundum*), *Gerbera jamesonii* (Barberton daisy), *Pentzia grandiflora* (matricaria) and *Phaenocoma prolifera* (Cape everlasting) could be planted together. Although they are not true daisies, species of *Lampranthus* (vygies) could also be used as the flowers look like daisies and the leaves make a good contrast. Interplanting with annuals would allow one to make regular changes to a bed. Suggested annuals are *Arctotis fastuosa* (bittergousblom), *A. acaulis* (bushy arctotis), *Dimorphotheca pluvialis* (white Namaqualand daisy), *D. sinuata* (Namaqualand daisies), *Felicia elongata* (tricolour felicia) and *Ceratotheca triloba* (wild foxglove), although the last might get rather tall. Lastly, one could make a 'blue' bed by using flowers like dwarf agapanthus, *Anchusa capensis* (forget-me-not) and *Merwilla plumbea* (blue squill).

References

- Manning, J. & Goldblatt, P. 2002. A distinctive new species of Felicia (Asteraceae) from Western


Credits

* S.J. Smithies  
* National Herbarium, Pretoria  
* October 2005