book review

Easy guide to indigenous shrubs

Pitta Joffe (2003)
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This is a welcome addition to local literature on gardening with indigenous plants. As with the author's previous books on the subject, this one is packed with very useful information.

The *Introduction* explains the need for such a book. It also dwells on the importance and use of shrubs in gardens, particularly small gardens. The author gives a few useful tips for smaller (e.g. townhouse) gardens, including how to train large shrubs into small trees.

The next section, *What are shrubs and why do people like growing them*, explains the different functions and uses that shrubs can perform in a garden. There are short descriptions of how the fruit, nectar and seeds of shrubs can be used to attract birds. In addition, shrubs can be planted specifically for their profusion of flowers, lovely foliage and fragrance, or to screen strong winds and block unsightly views.

Tips on planning a garden emphasises the importance of the vertical and horizontal design of a garden. According to Joffe, 'Shrubs give gardens shape and structure and provide a sense of enclosure'. She suggests what plants to use in particular situations, and discusses the use of shrubs as hedges, evergreen vs. deciduous shrubs, and the use of foliage texture, shape, colour, and aroma. Another point that the book emphasises throughout is the importance of taking the width of a plant into consideration when planning a garden. This section also contains a box titled *Plan your garden — don't just let it happen!* that gives hints on the importance and techniques of planning.

The section titled *How to plant and care for shrubs* contains invaluable information on pre-planting preparations, the importance of deep watering to ensure the development of a good deep root system, and when and how to water. There is also a section on pests that describes the most common pests, the symptoms they produce, and safe ways of dealing with them. The book provides a few 'safe pesticide' recipes that are environmentally-friendly and non-toxic to the useful creatures that inhabit the garden. There is also information on feeding plants, when to fertilise, what fertiliser is best for different situations, and the importance of applying correct proportions. It also includes a short explanation of the numerical formulas of fertilisers. The book also deals with the importance of mulch, its functions, and sources thereof, as well as the necessity of regularly replenishing the mulch layer. The last part of this section gives good information on why, how and when to prune shrubs.

Birds and butterflies bring your garden to life! uses symbols to indicate species that are useful for attracting birds and insects. This section gives general and specific information on what to look for when choosing suitable plants, and tips on creating suitable habitats that will attract birds, butterflies, and moths to your garden.

The section *It's easy to propagate your own plants* gives valuable information on propagating shrubs (and plants in general) from seeds and cuttings. It also includes tips on constructing makeshift 'greenhouses' for germination and for growing seedlings and cuttings. *'Potting on'* instructs the reader on how to prepare seedlings and cuttings before planting them out in the garden. This section also contains a *Propagation glossary* to help explain the terms used.

How to use this book helps the reader to choose the best shrub for a specific spot in their garden. It also gives a guide to frost areas, and reminds us to keep microclimates in mind. Furthermore, it explains how the information in the main section is represented, how size indications are illustrated and includes a key for the symbols used to indicate the shape, characteristics and growth requirements for each species.

The main part of the book contains information on over 94 shrub species. The author's previous books dealt with many of these plants, but 12 of these are new accounts and much of the previous information has been pruned or expanded upon for this book. Information provided for each species includes its common name (in various languages), its scientific name and family name, and full colour photographs of the mature plant that show its habit and close-ups of the flowers. There is also a description of the shrub and its uses, how to propagate and cultivate it, its natural distribution, an indication of size, characteristics, growth requirements, whether it is attractive to birds and insects, and its flower colour and flowering time. For many species, the author gives some brief information on related species, which adds to the usefulness of the book. A wealth of useful hints are scattered in boxes throughout the book, most are general, but some pertain to the specific species under discussion.

The shrubs are divided into small, medium and large according to their height. These sections are colour-coded for easy reference. The number of species treated is as follows: small shrubs (36); medium shrubs (25); and large shrubs (33)

The book ends with a *List of references* and a comprehensive *Index* containing scientific names, common names, and family names, thus making it very easy to find information on a specific shrub.

This informative, well-illustrated book is certainly "a must" on the bookshelf of every gardener who is serious about having indigenous plants in the garden. ▲

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