

Plant of the week: *Mackaya* – a beautiful shrub

SOME plants require a lot of attention and the *Bella* species comes under this category.

Gardeners often come across them by chance and then memorise their names.

Mackaya bella is a beautiful shrub, or small tree, with slender branches and dark green leaves. The leaves are simple and symmetric.

It has beautiful, large mauve to white flowers usually marked with fine purple-pink lines.

Beautiful

The genus *Mackaya* was named after James Townsend Mackay, author of *Flora Hibernica*.

There is only one species in the genus *Mackaya*. Its specific name, *Bella*, means beautiful, a tribute to its large bell-shaped flowers.

The forest bell bush grows naturally in Swaziland and South Africa's Northern Province in evergreen for-ests, often along the edges of streams.

It makes a stunning display when planted in a pot and can be used as screening in a semi-sha-



BELLA: With a little care these plants produce beautiful mauve and white flowers

ded area. The river bell is a lovely garden plant which thrives in shade but flowers best with more sun although this may cause the leaves to yellow. A forest bell bush

should be planted in well-drained soil with lots of compost.

Protected

Water well in summer,

less frequently in winter. *Mackaya bella* is sensitive to frost so should be protected. If left out in frost, it should be drastically pruned to encourage new growth.

Questions and answers

How do I prune a *Clair-de-Lune*?



MIMOSA: *Clair-de-Lune* does not need much pruning

Q I read about the *Mimosa Clair-de-Lune* a while ago but there was no mention of how to prune it after flowering. Mine bloomed in March and to be exact I planted it two years ago (it is about two metres high). Can I cut the lower branches (which are interfering with the flowering of a hardy perennial? And above all, can I prune it?

A With regard to the lower branches, go ahead and cut them. Otherwise, there is no need to prune it right now. If you are in a windy area, you will need to shape the tree so that it is resists wind better (the thinner branches could break). Then prune next year, right after the flowers fall.

Nostalgic for capers

Q When I was young (I'm 85), my father planted four capers which bore fruit and those which we did not pick turned into beautiful blooms. I have looked for this plant in several garden shops but have never found one. Perhaps you could tell me where I can buy one?

A The Var remains the best place for Mediterranean nurseries. The Rey nurseries, for example, produce *Capparis spinosa inermis*, a less prickly variety than those that grow wildly in the Mediterranean. It is the buds of the flowers which are picked and pickled in vinegar. It is a pity this bush which is perfectly suitable for

dry climates is difficult to find in nurseries but you can simply order it from your favourite retailer who should not have any difficulties finding it. Otherwise you can order over the internet at www.aromatiques.com



CAPERS: Ideally suited to the Mediterranean climate

Where can I find one?

Q I would really like to find an *Aspidistra*.

A This simple plant is an excellent ground cover for fully shaded areas. Flower shops usually offer the variegated variety which can look artificial outside. Your garden shop should be able to get it for you on order.



ASPIDISTRA: Watch out for the artificial looking one

You can still plant but make it quick



HIBISCUS: There is still time to plant these flowers

ONCE the weather starts getting warmer most people believe it is too late to plant. However, now is the ideal season for plants which are sensitive to cold. The soil is just warm enough and the majority of semi-tropical plants have already acclimatised in greenhouses or outside.

It is an ideal time for palm trees, banana trees and hibiscus but you do need to take a little extra care.

Firstly, make a deep hole: at least 40cm for a small-sized pot. Cover the bottom with the original broken up soil, then put the pot in place and fill up by adding humus to the soil and ground horn.

Form a basin, at least 60cm wide and 20cm high, which will hold up to 20 or 30 litres with every watering. These steps are necessary to force the roots to grow deep down. Avoid going away for any length of time this summer or find someone to water the plants for you, which is always better than automatic irrigation systems.

Your fragile plants will take advantage of the coming autumn to gather strength before the first cold spells arrive next winter.

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