

# African shrub evaluated for possible introduction

The Los Angeles State and County Arboretum initiated its Plant Introduction Program in 1958 with the release of *Felicia amelloides* 'Santa Anita'. Since that time, over 100 different kinds of plants have been introduced to horticulture in Southern California, several of which are now commonly used in landscaping, such as the freeway daisy, the fall-flowering silk floss tree and new cultivars of *Agapanthus*.

The Plant Introduction Program of the Arboretum entails the testing of numerous plant types for their suitability to the growing conditions in Southern California. A candidate plant is scrutinized not only for its ornamental qualities but also for its adaptability to the Mediterranean climate of cool, wet winters and hot, dry summers.

The success of the Arboretum's introduction program comes from the breadth of material under consideration, ranging from ground covers and accents plant to trees and shrubs. At any one time, numerous plants are being considered, each at a different stage of evaluation. Because of the semi-arid climate of Southern California, the Arboretum is testing a number of plant species with low water needs. These are often referred to as "drought tolerant" plants. One such species that is currently receiving careful consideration is *Eriocephalus africanus*.

The name *Eriocephalus africanus* is Greek, meaning "wooly-headed" and "from Africa". In its native South Africa, this species is known as "Kapokbossie" (little Kapok bush) or "wilde-roosmaryn" (wild rosemary). From these names, one can correctly assume that the plant is aromatic and has a wooly or cottony appearance at some point. And in fact, the seeds, found in clusters at the ends of branches, are densely covered with small hairs.

The African rosemary is a member of the daisy or sunflower family and is not related to the real rosemary, *Rosmarinus officinalis*, of the mint family. The plant itself is a small much-branched shrub up to three feet high and about as broad. The leaves are aromatic, evergreen, alternate in arrangement, gray-green in color, and small and narrow in shape. The small white flowers are clustered at the end of branches. They appear mainly in the winter months, but flowers can be found from November to April. These flower clusters are followed by the hairy seeds that give the plant its name.

Because the African Rosemary or Kapokbossie originates from a geographical region with a Mediterranean climate similar to our own, the plant grows easily in Southern California. The species naturally occurs over a wide area along the coastal parts of the Cape Province of South Africa. It is a rather hardy plant and tolerates a variety of soil types. It should be given plenty of water during the winter months and needs only occasional water during the rest of the year. The species is easily grown from seed sown in the fall, and germination occurs in about two weeks. The plant can also be grown from cuttings taken late in winter or early in spring. This small shrub with its gray-green foliage looks best in the landscape when grouped together and used to offset the green foliage of many other garden shrubs.

This is just one example of the kinds of plants that the Arboretum continues to evaluate in its search for new plant species for the urban landscape of Southern California. Many other interesting new plant types should be expected in the future.

---Dr. Daryl Koutnik, biologist



Fuzzy seeds which give *Eriocephalus africanus* its botanical name will soon replace flower clusters.





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