Aloe species’ flowers delight garden visitors

Blossoms usually make appearances in midwinter

Walnut Creek’s Ruth Bancroft is a national authority on drought-resistant gardening. Twice a month, she and her staff share their knowledge with readers.

One of the most commonly grown aloes in California is Aloe arborescens, much admired for its conical spires of flowers, normally red, in midwinter. However, its close relative Aloe mutabilis is seldom seen in gardens here, differing from its cousin in its smaller size and in its flowers.

While A. arborescens grows to be a large rounded shrub, eventually attaining a height of about 8 to 10 feet, A. mutabilis develops only a short stem and is seldom more than a few feet high.

Plants in nature may have offsets or remain single-headed, but in cultivation this species always seems to form clumps.

The swordlike leaves of A. mutabilis, green to bluish-green in color and with toothy edges, do not differ significantly from those of its larger relative. In both species, the leaves are softer and more pliable than one might suppose from seeing the plant, and the teeth along the margins are not so sharp as to be a hazard.

Like A. arborescens, A. mutabilis flowers in winter, mainly in January and February, at the Ruth Bancroft Garden. The flower spikes of each normally are not branching, although occasionally there may be a single side branch.

Two or three spikes may emerge from a single rosette, and a clump with multiple flower stalks puts on quite a show. The cones of flowers of A. arborescens are all of one color — usually red, but sometimes yellow or pink. In contrast, the flowers of A. mutabilis lighten as they open, creating a pleasing contrast between the red buds and the light yellow of the open flowers. This two-tone effect is more pronounced in some plants than others.

In nature, A. mutabilis almost always grows on cliffs or steep rocky slopes, but it will grow quite happily on flat ground as long as it has excellent drainage.

It is a little more cold-hardy than A. arborescens, enduring temperatures down to the mid-20s without difficulties. As a result, we are able to grow it without a protective winter cover.

As with other aloe species, this one is attractive to hummingbirds for its nectar-filled tubular flowers.

The swordlike leaves of Aloe mutabilis may look formidable, but they are softer and more pliable than one might suppose. The teeth along the margins are not so sharp as to be a hazard.

If you have a question for the Ruth Bancroft Garden, email info@ruthbancroftgarden.org. For tour and event information, go to www.ruthbancroftgarden.org.

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