

DIG THIS By Peg Tillery (for 07-17-02) , ©2005

About six years ago Master Gardener Don McDonald gave me my first hebe. I've been hooked ever since on this wonderful plant native to New Zealand. They're also my husband's favorite plant. In the last few weeks all the hebes in our garden have been blooming and I thought you'd all like to be tempted too by this versatile and decoratively appealing plant.

Don says hebes are good for any windy location. The leaves have a closed growing tip and open like a clamshell. He says look closely at the leaves and you'll see the covered growing tip. This feature keeps the edges of the leaves from getting torn up or stressed by windy conditions. Hebes are also drought tolerant and prefer well drained soil.

"One of the best things about hebes," says Don, "is there are over 200 species to choose from and lots of different cultivars." Gardeners will also find a large range of size and texture in hebes. Peri-hebe is closely related to hebe and is a ground cover. Whip cord hebe looks like a conifer and gets little white flowers. Don says sizes range from close to the ground up to quite tall. Topiaria is a tall variety. Salicifolia (means willow foliage) gets six to eight feet tall. He recommends Boxwood hebe as a good substitute for boxwood. "I like hebes best because they're disease and insect free. They're iron clad," he said.

Don began collecting hebes when a nursery friend had three or four varieties of hebes that had spent several years in pots above ground and out in the open. "I figured if they could survive those conditions, they'd make it anywhere," he said.

Our local nurseries carry several varieties of hebes. Don orders some of his plants as seeds from England and New Zealand. "They start easily, but if you're going to try it, just place the seeds on top of the growing medium," Don said.

Hebes also root well from cuttings and will root freely where stems touch the ground. Many local gardeners have taken pruning classes from Don. He recommends pruning hebes after they flower. Don't cut back to bare wood though. He also suggests planting hebes where they get sun at least a half day.

I asked for Don's favorite hebes. At the moment his favorites are: Topiaria, Hebe recurba, McKean, Canterburiensis and Marjorie Fish. Canterburiensis has dark green leaves with a profusion of white flowers. Topiaria is a dense dome-shaped shrub with broadly elliptic to obovate, glossy, gray-green leaves and white flowers. Salicifolia (mentioned above) is erect to spreading with narrow, pointed, willow-like lance-shaped mid-green leaves and small white or pale lilac-blue flowers.

Some of my gardening friends like to grow hebes in pots. But, as Don reminded me, we run the risk of losing our hebes in this manner. The roots of containerized plants are

where winter damage occurs quickly in cold weather. Some gardeners like the look of hebes in containers so much, they're willing to run this risk.

My husband and I have two huge matching hebes (we liked them so much we bought two). I unfortunately lost the tag for them. The leaves are deep purple underneath and deep dark green tinged with dark purple on top. Flowers are deep violet. Both bushes are nearly five feet tall by four feet wide. Several years ago their growth was killed to the ground by a hard frost and very cold weather and we cut them back thinking we'd nothing to lose. They've regrown to their present size. They may be Hebe 'Autumn Glory' described as "an erect then spreading shrub with bronze shoots and dark green leaves with red margins and dark purple flowers."

You may want to visit our local library and consult The American Horticultural Society's "A-Z Encyclopedia of Garden Plants" where you'll find photos and descriptions of hebes. I especially like the whipcord varieties. Visit www.hebesoc.vispa.com which is the Hebe Society website (from New Zealand). The society was formed for the preservation, propagation and study of hebes but has expanded their efforts to cover all New Zealand native plants. You might also try to locate a book called "Hebes Here and There" by Graham Hutchins published in England and available through Wisley Gardens in England. You might see if the library has access to this book for further research.

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