

Barks, shoots and leaves

Grafton Nursery grows hardy forms of Antipodean Eucalyptus that are ideal for British gardens

WORDS JOHN HOYLAND PHOTOGRAPHS JASON INGRAM



Gower Hilary Collins checks the growth on a selection of the hardy eucalyptus grown at Grafton Nursery. Nearby assistant grower Adam Barnes keeps the more mature trees in check with some careful pruning.

VERY FEW TREES ARE AS FASCINATING AS EUCALYPTS: THEY ARE HIGHLY EVOLVED AND EXTREMELY VARIED

Gardeners can be blinkered, disregarding a whole genus because of the faults of a few members. *Eucalyptus* has suffered this fate, largely because of the thuggish behaviour of *Eucalyptus gunnii*, the most widely available species, which will grow to huge proportions in a very short time. “There are far better species,” says grower Hilary Collins. “Beautiful eucalypts for small terraces or large pots, those for use as hedging or as foliage for cut flowers, and those

for gardeners who want large trees. Even *gunnii* is gorgeous if it is grown well.”

Hilary’s enthusiasm for the genus is boundless. “Very few trees are as fascinating as these: they are highly evolved and extremely varied. The young leaves are often very different from the mature ones. They are beautiful as well as useful,” she says. And they needn’t get out of hand: most *Eucalyptus* can be coppiced (cut back close to the base) to encourage new growth with juvenile foliage and to keep the tree compact.

Hilary set up Grafton Nursery ten years ago in a corner of a derelict seven-acre nursery. “We are in year ten of what was intended to be a five-year project to get the nursery up to scratch,” says Hilary. “I have read whatever I can get my hands on and done a massive amount of research about eucalypts.” This research has included hands-on projects in the nursery to see how plants respond to different sowing, growing and pruning regimes.

The plants are grown in peat-free compost in Air-Pots, a system originally developed in Australia specifically for *Eucalyptus* after it was discovered that traditional pot-grown trees had poor root systems and would often fall over when mature. The Air-Pots system prevents roots from spiralling around their container and is now used throughout the tree production industry. Hilary recommends that *Eucalyptus* destined for pots be grown in an Air-Pot that is placed inside another container of choice.

Like most growers, Hilary’s favourite plant changes. She currently favours *Eucalyptus gunnii* Azura (= ‘Cagire’), a new dwarf hybrid, compact and hardy with bright silvery-blue foliage. Among the many tempting forms on show, I spotted a multi-stemmed *Eucalyptus pauciflora* subsp. *debeuzevillei*, which has marbled grey-and-white bark and large, leathery, grey-green leaves.

Many eucalypts look exotic, other-worldly even, but wandering round the nursery I was struck by how many would sit comfortably in the British landscape. A screen of *E. kybeanensis* could be mistaken for an attractive willow, with reddish leaf stems and tight clusters of white, feathery flowers. It is hardy to -16°C and will grow almost anywhere, even on poor, stony soil.

If you’re new to *Eucalyptus*, help is at hand: the nursery produces a chart detailing plant characteristics and growing conditions to help gardeners make the right choice for their garden. As Hilary confidently declares: “Whatever your requirement, there is a *Eucalyptus* for you.” □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Address Grafton Nursery, Grafton Flyford, Worcestershire WR7 4PW.

Tel 01905 888098 (answerphone)/07515 261511.

Website hardy-eucalyptus.com

Open by appointment only. Please telephone to arrange.

FOR CUTTING

1 *Eucalyptus* ‘Shannon Blue’
A hybrid bred for the floristry trade, this vigorous plant has stems of rounded, glaucous, silver leaves. It can be grown as a hedge and retains its colour through the winter. Unpruned height 10m. RHS H5*.

2 *Eucalyptus nicholii*
An airy tree with narrow, almost feathery, sage-green leaves. Its common name – narrow-leaved black peppermint – references its strongly aromatic foliage. Unpruned height 12m. RHS H5.

3 *Eucalyptus pulverulenta* ‘Baby Blue’
A compact, bushy cultivar that can be grown in a pot. The silvery-grey stems are long-lasting when cut for flower arrangements. Unpruned height 5m. RHS H5.

4 *Eucalyptus gunnii*
The most widely grown species in the UK. It has peeling cream and brown bark, rounded, glaucous-blue juvenile leaves and elliptic or sickle-shaped, grey-green adult leaves. Several compact cultivars have been introduced. It grows rapidly and left unpruned can reach 18m. AGM*. RHS H5.

5 *Eucalyptus glaucescens* ‘Tinderry’
A vigorous, bushy form with sparkling silvery leaves and white stems. The new growth is tinged with pink. At its best when coppiced. Unpruned height 12m. RHS H5.

6 *Eucalyptus rubida*
The young shoots have a coppery sheen over the silvery-blue, rounded leaves. The adult leaves are glaucous and elongated. Old bark flakes away to reveal a shiny white trunk. Unpruned height 15m. RHS H5.

7 *Eucalyptus perriniana*
A moderately dense small tree with off-white, grey or green bark. Aromatic, elongated, bluish-green young shoots produce distinctive perfoliate, juvenile leaves that eventually detach and spin on dried out stems. Adult foliage is glaucous and lance-shaped. Umbels of three white or cream flowers in summer. Unpruned height 10m. RHS H6.

8 *Eucalyptus coccifera*
Lanceolate, peppermint-scented juvenile foliage on maroon shoots, with blue-green elongated adult foliage and mottled white and grey bark. Lots of small white flowers in the summer. Unpruned height 15m. RHS H5.

9 *Eucalyptus archeri*
Smooth grey and white bark with occasional patches of pink. Juvenile foliage is grey-green on purple-flushed stems. Adult foliage is darker. Unpruned height 12m. RHS H5.

ADVICE FOR GROWING FOR FOLIAGE
Choose the right species. Mulch, feed and water from April until September. Leave to grow for two seasons or until the trunk is over 5cm in diameter at a height of 1m from the ground. Pollard by cutting trunk to around 1m in mid March and any remaining branchlets to 2.5cm. Harvest the resulting regrowth October to March. Repeat annually.

Turn the page for more *Eucalyptus* suggestions ▷



*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society. †Hardiness ratings given where available.

FOR SCREENING

1 *Eucalyptus parvula*

Reddish stems on rounded juvenile leaves. Mature trees have willow-like foliage and the grey bark peels to reveal a silvery trunk. Unpruned height 10m. AGM. RHS H5.

2 *Eucalyptus pauciflora* subsp. *debeuzevillei*

Prized for its marbled white and pale grey bark and its spreading habit. The leaves are larger than in most species, with a leathery texture. Unpruned height 10m. AGM. RHS H6.

3 *Eucalyptus kitsoniana*

Willow-like leaves and masses of small flowers. Performs particularly well as a screen or hedge. Will grow in wet soils and tolerates salt-laden winds. Unpruned height 5-10m. RHS H5.

4 *Eucalyptus urnigera*

A fast-growing tree with peeling bark that is silvery white when young, maturing to a tapestry of grey, olive and gold. The young leaves and stems are silvery-grey, maturing to blue-grey. Unpruned height 15m. RHS H5.

5 *Eucalyptus subcrenulata*

Smooth grey bark with olive-green patches. When coppiced it makes a dense hedge of small, rounded leaves that are a glossy green, occasionally with a red edge. Unpruned height 15m. RHS H4.

6 *Eucalyptus pauciflora* subsp. *niphophila*

Cream, green and grey patches of bark flake away to reveal a chalky white trunk. Usually grown as a multi-stemmed tree, it has elliptical grey-green leaves. Unpruned height 7m. AGM. RHS H6.

ADVICE FOR GROWING FOR SCREENING

Select the right species for your site, soil type and purpose. Multi-stemmed eucalyptus make good screening trees up to 10m. Keep young trees free of grass and weeds for 1m diameter around the base and water with ten to 15 litres of water twice a week for the tree's first summer. Feed with a general purpose fertiliser (Grafton uses Vitax Q4), sulphur chips and iron.

To keep at around 6-7m, prune from an early age (from two years old) to encourage bushiness. Keep the top of the canopy narrower than the base to ensure good light levels reach all parts of the tree. Prune in mid March and give a light trim in June if required. Never prune in winter.

Trees that are 10-15m will need a tree surgeon to reduce the crown every few years.



FOR SMALL TREES AND POTS

1 *Eucalyptus kybeanensis*

A good choice for a specimen tree in a smaller garden, grown either as a standard or as a multi-stem. The foliage is reminiscent of that of an olive tree. Best grown in the ground. Unpruned height 4m. RHS H5.

2 *Eucalyptus neglecta*

Enormous, rounded juvenile leaves, that mature to glossy, bay-like leaves. Happy in any soil including sandy and also waterlogged clays. Fast growing. Grow in border or a large pot. Unpruned height 6m. RHS H6.

3 *Eucalyptus gregsoniana*

Much shorter than most *Eucalyptus*, with a smooth silvery and cream bark. The new stems are a coppery red and the leaves elongated. Best grown in the ground for stability or in a heavy pot. Unpruned height 5m. RHS H5.

4 *Eucalyptus pauciflora* subsp. *pauciflora*

This selection from Mount Buffalo, Australia has oval-shaped, blue-green leaves on coral stems. Needs annual pruning to create density if it is grown as a hedge. Tolerates salt winds. Grow in pot or border. Unpruned height 6m. RHS H6.

5 *Eucalyptus gunnii* 'France Bleu'

A recently introduced cultivar with bright silvery-blue foliage. It forms a multi-stemmed shrub and needs regular pruning to keep its compact, rounded shape. Grow in a pot or border. Unpruned height 3-5m. RHS H5.

6 *Eucalyptus pauciflora* subsp. *niphophila* 'Mount Bogong'

A small tree with an open habit, which looks good grown as a multi-stemmed specimen in a pot. The bark is smooth with a silver and olive colouring. Grow in a pot or border. Unpruned height 5m. RHS H6.

ADVICE FOR GROWING IN POTS

Choose a species or cultivar that lends itself to pot cultivation, such as a dwarf species or multi-stemmed specimen. Grafton grows its trees in Air-Pot containers and recommends keeping your tree in this container system for life to ensure roots remain active and healthy. Stand Air-Pots inside weighty ornamental containers and position on a flagstone to prevent rooting into the ground beneath.

The best watering is achieved using a drip irrigation system, but if this isn't possible hand-water daily with enough water to run out of the bottom of the pot from April to October. Keep just moist through winter. If eucalyptus dry out, they quickly go brown and crispy. Prune in mid March (National Eucalyptus Day is 18 March) and again the first week in June – never in winter. Feed from April to September with a high potash fertiliser, sulphur chips and iron. Pot on into next Air-Pot (four times the volume) when existing pot becomes full of roots; usually every couple of years. Mulch with bark or gravel. Prevent roots from freezing in winter.