



# Why we should all be growing plectranthus

The Victorian favourite is finding justly deserved favour again, reveals John Hoyland



IT is always exciting when a group of plants that has long been neglected begins to emerge from the shadows. *Plectranthus* (even the name sounds unfamiliar) were popular with the Victorians both as plants for bedding out in the summer and as year-round pot plants in conservatories and greenhouses. Valued for their patterned or marbled evergreen foliage and elegant flowers coupled with easy cultivation the family was the mainstay of many Victorian parks and gardens. The ebb and flow of garden fashions has meant that, until recently, plectranthus were seen mainly as trailing foliage in hanging baskets or as sad house plants in dull waiting rooms.

*Plectranthus* range in size from prostrate types barely a few inches high to giants that can reach several yards tall. The low, spreading forms tend to have heart-shaped leaves that are delicately marbled or veined. These will drape over the edges of containers or spread themselves around trees and shrubs to form an attractive groundcover. None of the genus is hardy in Britain, so needs to be treated as bedding plants or grown in a conservatory or greenhouse, at least during the winter. After a few years, plants can become woody and unattractive, so take cuttings to ensure you have fresh, healthy plants.

## ‘Taller forms provide dramatic presence in the garden’

Taller forms provide dramatic presence, both in the garden and in the conservatory, particularly in late summer and autumn, alongside salvias and other tender perennials. My *Plectranthus ecklonii* reaches 5ft tall and its soft-blue flowers are perfect partners to the near-black flowers of *Salvia guaranitica* ‘Black and Blue’. There is a pink-flowered form called ‘Erma’ that I have seen partnered with the deep-red flower spikes of *Salvia confertiflora* to superb effect.

These are big plants that require lots of space. More manageable, at about 3ft tall,



Facing page: Purple-tinged *Plectranthus ciliatus* ‘Nico’ (also called ‘Nikki’) is perfect for pots and summer groundcover. Above: *Plectranthus ecklonii* ‘Medley Wood’

is *Plectranthus zuluensis*, a plant that demands to be grown for its name alone. The foliage is bright green and, in late summer, is covered with fat spikes of pale-blue flowers. It is as happy spending the year in the conservatory as it is being bedded out during the summer, as long as it receives some shade during the hottest parts of the day.

The most commonly available member of the family is *Plectranthus argentatus*, which has large, velvety, silver-grey leaves and stems with a purple hue. I use it in terracotta pots as a luxurious background to more exuberant summer bedding and colourful tender perennials. It is also planted out each year in an inhospitable shady corner between a yew hedge and a wall, where it thrives in the poor, dry soil and shines through the gloom. This plant is equally at home in densely planted borders among hardy herbaceous perennials.

In the Glyndebourne gardens, it is planted in the gaps left by tulips, soon filling a large

area. It looks spectacular there when the gardeners plant it with heliotropes: the dark purple of the latter’s flowers is reprised in the purple sheen on the stems of the plectranthus. Cuttings taken in the summer will make imposing plants for the house or conservatory in winter, where the velvety texture of the leaves adds a sense of comfort and luxury.

For a plant that will cascade over pots and containers, look at *Plectranthus ciliatus* ‘Nico’ (sometimes sold as ‘Nikki’), which has dark-green leaves with pronounced purple veins and a purple underside. Use it in the conservatory as a foil to colourful flowers or as a calming break between more boisterous plants. In the garden, as a temporary groundcover plant during the summer, ‘Nico’ will quickly form an undulating blanket to cover empty spaces. A similar job will be done by *P. hadiensis* var. *tomentosus*, often sold as Cuban oregano, which has small round leaves that are densely packed on the stems. Echoing ‘Nico’, it never gets much taller than 9in, but will tumble down the side of tall pots or rapidly spread along the ground.

For a more floriferous short plant, grow *Plectranthus* ‘Mona Lavender’, which has glossy foliage smothered in lavender-blue flowers throughout the summer. There are about 40 plectranthus cultivars available from British nurseries, with more being added each year. The plant is all set for a well-deserved resurgence. 🐸

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### How to take cuttings from plectranthus

**Cuttings are best taken at the end of the summer**

Fill a 4in–5in pot with a proprietary cuttings compost and gently firm it down

**Cut the stem just below a set of leaves and then close above a set of leaves a few inches further up**

Remove the bottom leaves and, if the remaining leaves are large, cut them in half

**With the help of a pencil or a dibber, insert the cutting so that the first pair of leaves is just above the level of the compost**

Label, water and store the pot in a shady place. In a couple of weeks, the cuttings should have produced roots and can be potted into individual pots