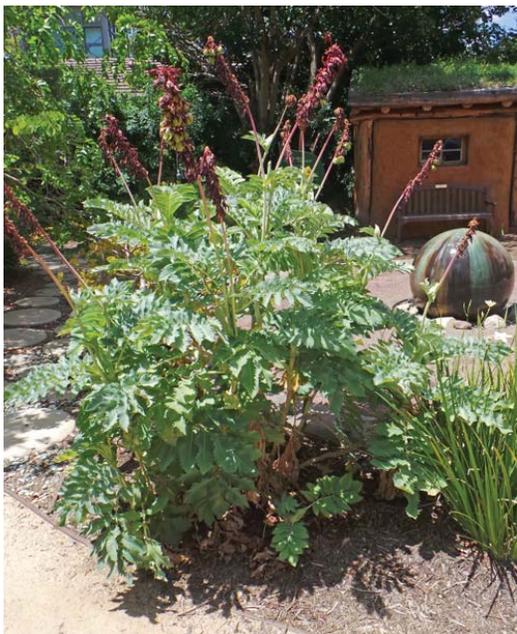


Honeybush, *Melianthus major*



***Melianthus major* is a tender shrub grown for its attractive foliage.**

One of six species in the genus, *Melianthus major* is an evergreen shrub in the family Melianthaceae native to drier areas of the southwestern Cape in South Africa. It is easy to grow, so has been used as a garden plant worldwide for its attractive foliage. With large blue, deeply incised leaves, honeybush makes a dramatic addition to containers or seasonal plantings. Although it is only hardy to zone 8, it is fast-growing so can be used as seasonal ornamental in colder areas. In the wild it is a winter grower, going dormant in the summer, but will grow well in the relatively cool summers of the Midwest. Honeybush received the



Honeybush is used as a seasonal ornamental in cool climates.

Royal Horticultural Society's Award of Garden Merit in 1993.



***Melianthus major* in habitat in the Cedarberg Mountains near Clanwilliam, South Africa.**

In its native habitat or other mild climates honeybush grows up to 10 feet tall and spreads by suckering roots (and has become an invasive plant in some areas, such as parts of New Zealand). It is naturally a sparsely branched shrub with a sprawling habit. But it looks best when pruned hard and is often treated more like a perennial than a shrub when used as an

ornamental. When grown as an annual seasonally in cold climates it remains much shorter, but the leaves are still as large. The pinnate bluish-green to silvery leaves are a foot or more long, with a peanut-butter-like scent when crushed. Each gracefully arched leaf has 10-15 leaflets, each with sharply serrated margins. The glaucous leaves have heavy substance and a smooth, almost waxy surface. The foliage is toxic if ingested, but is used medicinally (mainly topically) by indigenous people in South Africa.



The blue, pinnate leaves have leaflets with sharply serrated margins.

Although grown primarily as a foliage plant here, honeybush does flower where it can remain in the ground year-round, to flower on the previous year's wood. It blooms from late winter through spring. Tall terminal, narrow, spike-like racemes of lightly scented brownish crimson to maroon flowers are held well above the foliage. The tubular flowers produce copious nectar, attracting sunbirds and other nectar-feeding birds that pollinate the flowers in the wild. The flowers are followed by pale green, papery, bladder-like seed pods containing shiny black seeds.



The tall spike-like racemes (L and LC) have numerous crimson flowers (C and RC). The flowers are followed by pale green seed pods (R).

Use honeybush in beds and borders as a focal point or specimen plant. The architectural quality and coarse texture of the foliage provides dramatic contrast with smaller-leaved annuals or ornamental grasses. Its color makes it well suited to a 'Mediterranean



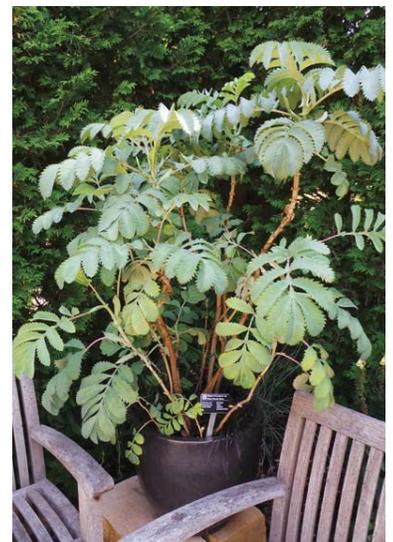
The flowers produce copious nectar that attracts nectar-feeding birds including silvereye (L), double-collared sunbird (C) and malachite sunbird (R).



Pair honeybush in containers with red or purple flowers and plants with fine-textured leaves.

style' planting and it does quite well in containers. Pair it with dark red or purple flowers for a cool, harmonizing color combination, or mix it with plants with bright red and orange flowers for greater contrast. Or use it with plants with purple leaves, such as dark-leaved sedum or heuchera cultivars, and coleus for an interesting foliage-only combination.

Grow honeybush in full sun to part shade. It does best as an ornamental in moist, fertile soil, although will tolerate lean, dry soil. Protect the plant from excessive wind. Although it is generally treated as an annual in colder climates, plants can



Honeybush at Olbrich Botanic Gardens, Madison, WI.



Grow honeybush in full sun to partial shade and moist soil.

(zone 7) than most and 'Purple Haze' is a selection from a nursery in Berkeley, California with finer foliage, a more spreading form, and a purple tinge to the stems and leaves.

be kept in containers over the winter indoors to remain evergreen or in a protected location where temperatures remain above 24; it should resprout from the base. Cut the stems back to three inches just as growth resumes in spring, as it looks better if it is cut to the ground each spring and allowed to grow new foliage even if the old stems survive. This plant can be propagated from seed or by herbaceous basal cutting in early spring or softwood cuttings taken in spring or summer. Sow seed indoors 6-8 weeks before the last frost. Fresh seed germinates in 3-4 weeks. Keep moist and barely covered with soil, as light enhances germination. Plant outdoors after all threat of frost has passed.

Plants grown from seed can be quite variable in color, with foliage ranging from green to silver to gray to blue. Few cultivars are available; 'Antonow's Blue' has powdery blue foliage and is more cold hardy (zone 7) than most and 'Purple Haze' is a selection from a nursery in Berkeley, California with finer foliage, a more spreading form, and a purple tinge to the stems and leaves.

– Susan Mahr, University of Wisconsin – Madison

Additional Information:

- *Melianthus Major* – Horticulture magazine article at www.hortmag.com/plants/collectors-choice/melianthus-major
- *Melianthus major* – on Plantzafrica.com, the South African National Biodiversity Institute's plant information website at www.plantzafrica.com/plantklm/melianthusmajor.htm