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Proteas

by Nancy Hawkins, UC Master Gardener

Have you ever been to the island of Maui? Then, you have probably seen the tropical shrub called Protea. On a recent field trip to the University of California Santa Cruz Arboretum, I had the opportunity to learn more about this unusual and unique plant.

Proteas are members of the ancient (300 million years old!) Proteaceae family, one of the oldest groups of flowering plants. They are naturally found in southwestern South Africa and parts of Australia with over 300 known species in South Africa alone. In these areas, the flowers are mostly harvested in the wild, though in recent years, many commercial flower plantations have sprung up. These beautiful flowers were first grown in the United States in San Diego and Santa Barbara counties about forty years ago. They were later grown in Hawaii. The climate and soil in these places most nearly duplicates their natural habitat.

Proteas are beautiful flowering evergreen shrubs. Tubular flowers in large clusters are surrounded by brightly colored bracts similar to artichokes or thistles. Proteas are perfect for use in low maintenance, low water use gardens, under the same conditions as many native California plants. They fit in with many landscape styles and give year round color and spectacular cut flowers.



Protea Flower in full bloom.

Now for the challenge! Proteas are difficult to grow, and not for beginners. They grow best in Sunset Climate Zones 16, 17, 21-24, which are all coastal areas in California. In our area, planting proteas is risky; we are a little too hot, a little too cold, and a little too alkaline.

They can tolerate over 100 degrees for a couple of days, but new growth and flower buds can burn when temperatures are extreme. Older plants are hardy to around 25° F. Rather than planting in full sun, provide some afternoon shade for more intense foliage and flower color and make sure the ground drains well. Avoid planting them in areas which have been heavily fertilized with phosphorous or with other garden flowers that need continuous moist soil. Most varieties prefer slightly acidic soil conditions, but will tolerate some alkalinity.

Proteas require little maintenance after they are established, but like most plants it takes a few seasons to develop an extensive root system so water judiciously until then. Successful protea growers claim that well drained soils are key, since proteas grow lateral roots near the surface and water must not stand around these roots. Decomposed granite and other sandy textured soils work well and adding compost and a slow release fertilizer as suitable for California natives will help insure a healthy plant. They are relatively drought tolerant and established plants need water every two to three weeks, on average. Proteas can become untidy if let go. Cut the flowers as they bloom and prune each year to shape the plant and keep it compact.

Many protea flowers can be dried. They will stay nice looking for a long time and drying is not difficult. Pick the flowers in their prime, strip off the bottom leaves, and then tie about 5 of the flowers together in a tight bunch. Hang them, heads down in a dry, dark, airy spot for about two weeks. Placing the cut and stripped stems in glycerin (one part glycerin to two parts water) keeps the plant material supple and helps it last longer. When tiny beads of glycerin appear on the leaves, take the flowers out and dry as above. Protea flowers are gorgeous additions to fall floral arrangements and Christmas wreaths.

So if you are ready for a challenge and thought you didn't have enough time to have magnificent flowering shrubs in your garden, think again, and think proteas.



Wreath of protea flowers and foliage

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