

Melianthus - Growing Guide

Growing Melianthus Major

Commonly known as 'Honey Bush'

In the 1890s an article was written in 'The Garden' (even then the journal of the Royal Horticultural Society) about Burncoose Garden. One of the specimen plants much admired at that time was *Melianthus major*. It still very much holds its special place in the garden today.

M. major is an evergreen shrub from the grasslands and hills of South Africa.

It is grown firstly because of its unusual architectural appearance. The foliage is pinnate and the 12in leaves a spectacular grey-green or blue green. This branching and suckering plant will grow in time up to 10ft although 4-6ft is perhaps more normal. Secondly, the peculiar flowers are produced in spike like racemes of 1-3ft in length. The flowers are brownish crimson to brick red and appear as individual spurs. The contrast between the grey-blue foliage and the huge red inflorescences quickly attracts attention. Those who have never seen this plant before are puzzled and covetous! Insects and bees go mad for the flowers too as its common name suggests.

The reference books say that this plant will not withstand below 0°C. We, and many other growers in the southern counties, would beg to differ. It certainly can withstand all manner of salt laden gales and also a fair amount of frost. In severe winters it can get cut back, even right down to ground level, but given a good mulch over the roots an established plant will readily reshoot in the spring. A plant growing to over 6ft in height has probably had a fair run of mild winters.

If you live in colder areas this plant can certainly be grown in a large pot in the greenhouse with a loam based compost and full light. Outside the

plant grows best in full sun in moderately good soil. It must not be grown in waterlogged areas.

Pruning is only necessary to tidy the plant up where shoots have fallen over or have some dieback after a cold winter.

Propagation from softwood cuttings in early summer with bottom heat is fairly easy. Digging suckering offsets or chopping up some of the roots to encourage more suckering growth is perhaps an easier way of propagating this plant quickly. We have never found the need to try to grow the seeds.



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Burncoose Nurseries: Gwennap, Redruth, Cornwall TR16 6BJ

Telephone: +44 (0) 1209 860316 Fax: +44 (0) 1209 860011 Email: info@burncoose.co.uk

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