

WORDS: Jim Cable PHOTOGRAPHS: Jason Ingram

BY GUM

The reputation of eucalyptus in the UK leaves a lot to be desired – but nurserywoman Hilary Collins is on a mission to change this

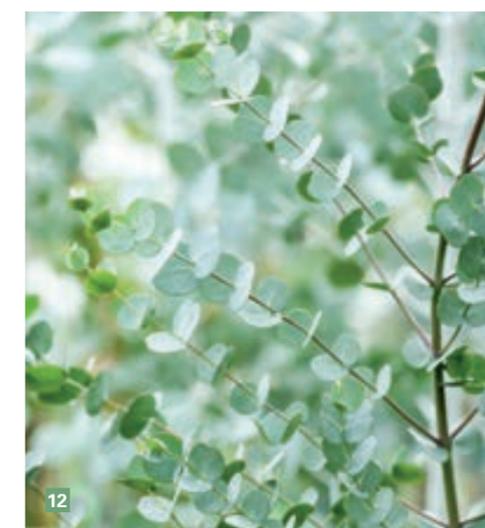
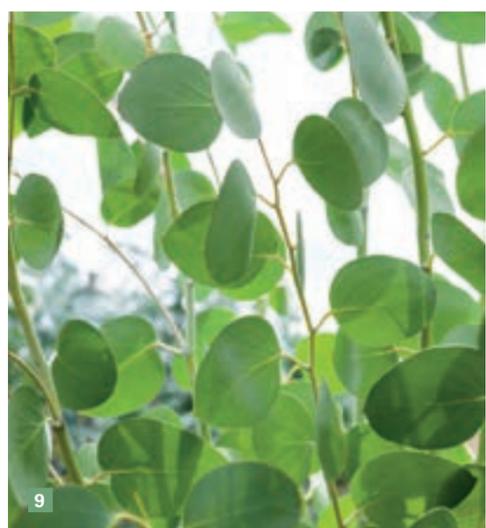
PREVIOUS PAGE

Eucalyptus 'Baby Blue'

RIGHT Hilary Collins

OPPOSITE PAGE

1. *Eucalyptus kybeanensis*
2. *E. urnigera*
3. *E.* 'Mount Buffalo'
4. *E. gregsoniana*
5. *E. neglecta*
6. *E. pauciflora* subsp. *niphophila* 'Mount Bogong'
7. *E. gunnii* France Bleu
8. *E. subcrenulata*
9. *E. pauciflora* subsp. *debeuzevillei*
10. *E. parvula*
11. *E. rodwayi*
12. *E. gunnii* Azura



Hilary Collins of Grafton Nursery near Worcester, the largest grower of eucalyptus in the UK, is exasperated with the way the genus is represented in British gardens. "It is a large group of plants and yet, so often, the lazy choice is *Eucalyptus gunnii*, which is just too big for most gardens unless you grow it as a bush. Add to that a poor root system due to bad nursery practices, and it is no wonder that leaning monsters have given the entire family a bad name." Therein lies the key messages in Collins' ethos – choose your eucalypt for the role it has to serve, prune it correctly at the right time of year and avoid root-circling in containers.

She and her husband Steve bought Grafton Nursery 11 years ago. The site was a derelict bedding nursery that needed a lot of refurbishment, but they were excited by the idea of growing something a bit different. At the time, they had already started growing a few species of eucalyptus, and were slightly puzzled by their bad reputation. So the couple pledged their allegiance to the misunderstood genus of nearly a thousand species, focused on the hardy members and were soon hooked.

Collins has a science background and ran tree disease trials as a horticultural student, before going on to grow trees in nurseries and run a landscaping business with Steve, so she understands both the physiology of eucalyptus and the aesthetics of garden design. Her plants are hardy seed selections grown in peat-free compost in Air-Pots, and, she says, are climate-change-resistant super trees that can offer not only handsome bark and foliage, but serve numerous roles in the designed landscape. Coppicing and pollarding are management practices that can be built into a post-design maintenance scheme, making them even more versatile.

Many eucalyptus thrive in damp or boggy ground and can be a useful component in sustainable drainage systems for new housing developments. Swamp gums such as *E. rodwayi* and *E. aggregata* have green strap-like leaves akin to willow, and sit easily in our landscape, but being evergreen, will act as a water sump all year, as opposed to half.

Eucalyptus can also be used for screening. Most of them have a light airy canopy, so you need to use multi-stemmed trees pruned →

"HER PLANTS ARE HARDY SEED SELECTIONS GROWN IN PEAT-FREE COMPOST IN AIR-POTS, AND, SHE SAYS, ARE CLIMATE-CHANGE-RESISTANT SUPER TREES"



At Grafton, Collins and her team test new species, maintenance models and propagation methods

TOP TIPS FOR GROWING EUCALYPTUS

- **Fast establishment** in the first year is vital. “Fail to establish a eucalyptus in year one, and it will never thrive,” says Collins. “The tree must be correctly specified for the given conditions and have been Air-Pot grown.”
- **When planting** in the ground, dig a narrow planting pit twice the depth of the pot, with the bottom half filled with a sharp sand/topsoil mix to encourage deep rooting.
- **Plant with** Rootgrow mycorrhizal fungi, and spray with the seaweed *Ecklonia maxima* on day one. Root drench with the same on day four.
- **Keep a** grass and weed-free circle of 1m diameter around the trunk for two years.
- **Make sure** it is watered copiously over the first summer, twice a week.
- **Whether coppicing,** pollarding or less drastic shaping, prune the tree around 18 March (National Eucalyptus Day) each year, and tip prune in June if bushiness is required. Never prune in autumn or winter.
- **Feed with** high potash fertiliser in April if it has been pruned heavily, and in August/September for the first couple of years to ripen the wood for winter.

“MOST OF THEM HAVE A LIGHT AIRY CANOPY, SO YOU CAN USE MULTI-STEMMED TREES TO ACHIEVE A HEDGE OR SCREEN”

annually to achieve a hedge or screen. Layering different species one in front of another can create a lovely effect. Collins suggests that if a client had room, planting a row of taller *E. urnigera* at the back, followed by single or multi-stemmed *E. parvula* and then the jungle-like, large-leaved *E. neglecta* at the front will give a dense multi-toned and textured barrier.

Despite what many people think, the genus also has options for small gardens and containers. The nursery won Gold at RHS Chelsea this year showcasing their ‘seven dwarves’, which can work where space is tight. *E. kybeanensis* is a graceful tree for growing in the ground in a small garden, reaching around 4m if unpruned. It is hardier than an olive tree, but has a similar character. The other six – *E. gunnii* cultivars France Bleu, Azura and ‘Silverana’, *E. pauciflora* subsp. *niphophila* cultivars ‘Mount Bogong’ and ‘Mount Buffalo’, and *E. gregsoniana* – can be grown in a border, and also suit pot culture, but should be grown in Air-Pots, which are shaped and perforated to prevent root-circling. These can be hidden within another container, but a gap should remain between the two.

For winter interest, try *E. gregsoniana*, *E. pauciflora* subsp. *niphophila* ‘Mount Bogong’ and ‘Mount Buffalo’, which are all snow gums with pale marbled bark that light up small gardens and courtyards in

winter. *E. pauciflora* subsp. *debeuzevillei* is also prized for its silvery grey, cream and pale green flaking bark. However, with an unpruned height of around 10m, it is one for larger gardens. Some species, such as *E. subcrenulata* or *E. aggregata*, also flower in the winter months, providing food for winter-foraging bees.

At Grafton, there are more than 60 species and cultivars of eucalyptus, but it is far more than just a production nursery. In ongoing research trials, Collins tests out new species, and tries different propagation and growing models, including how to vary maintenance regimes in the landscape for different effects. As a result, the product range has been whittled down to their main ‘crops’ of really useful and user-friendly species and varieties, plus a few specimens of some truly rare ones for the avid collector.

The nursery is not open to the public, but Collins welcomes trade clients to get in touch. The website features extensive advice, and she is always on hand to help specify eucalypts for particular niches. She passionately wants us to succeed with them, and is also keen to give talks to designers so that these diverse trees “can make a successful contribution to the landscape in a beautiful and safe way”.

hardy-eucalyptus.com ○