

Dianella is a genus of evergreen herbaceous plants with attractive foliage, flowers and fruits, as yet unfamiliar to many gardeners. However, a host of fine new introductions are changing this. **James Armitage** investigates

DISCOVER DIANELLA

FEW HARDY herbaceous perennials from the Antipodes are regularly found in UK gardens. There is *Libertia*, and a few nice grasses and sedges, but precious little else springs readily to mind. One overlooked group of plants with all the exotic promise of faraway places is *Dianella*. Available in an expanding range of cultivars, these surprising plants are worth trying where suitable conditions allow.

The genus *Dianella* comprises around 30 species from tropical Asia to East Africa and Australasia, but few are grown widely in British gardens. Botanically, they are considered to be smaller relatives of phormiums and, with their dark fans of tough leaves, the affiliation is apparent.

Probably the most common species in the UK is *Dianella tasmanica*, native to cool, damp woodland in Tasmania and southeast Australia. It thrives in the moist, mild air of our westerly gardens and makes fine ground cover with its strappy foliage and branching stems of starry, pale blue flowers, but it is the glossy, inch-long (3cm) fruit that are most remarkable. In the best clones they are an amazing deep blue and look so



Dianella caerulea Cassa Blue

incongruous with the rest of the plant that it raises exclamations from the unacquainted. Its tolerance of shade makes it ideal for underplanting *Dicksonia antarctica* or other tree ferns, which can be difficult to partner. The cultivar *Dianella tasmanica* Tasred ('Tr20') has reddish tints to the leaves, especially in colder weather, while 'Emerald Arch' has bold, spreading foliage but does not often set fruit in the UK. There is also a plant with white streaks to the leaves, unfortunately prone to reversion, sold as *D. tasmanica* 'Variegata'.



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Dianella tasmanica

New Zealand species

From New Zealand comes *Dianella nigra*, another variable plant that, in cultivation, usually resembles a smaller version of *D. tasmanica*, with whitish flowers and far less impressive fruits. It is probably less hardy than *D. tasmanica* but a population at RHS Garden Wisley has been steadily filling a shady, quite dry space beneath a *Sophora microphylla* for more than 10 years. There is also a useful selection named *D. nigra* 'Margaret Pringle' which has white-margined, sometimes striped leaves.

Coloured foliage

Introduced to Britain from Australia more than 200 years ago, *Dianella caerulea* is considered rather tender and is little grown, though in mild areas it stands a good chance of surviving. The species in the wild varies greatly but often carries its fans of foliage on short, upright stems, making it an ungainly garden plant. Recently, however, several tamer named selections, suited to pot culture, have been introduced, including *D. caerulea* Breeze ('Dcnco'), a compact cultivar with arching leaves and sky-blue

flowers. It is said to be drought tolerant, perhaps making it a better pot plant than *D. tasmanica*. Similar Cassa Blue ('Dbb03') has the benefit of distinctive blue foliage and looks well in pots with *Carex trifida* 'Chatham Blue' and *Elymus magellanicus*. Also available is Little Jess ('Dcmp01') with sprays of blue flowers and upright stems but of more tidy habit than the species.

Compact selections

Dianella revoluta is a species from forest and woodland in southeast Australia. The inrolled leaves alone can reach 1m (39in) but garden selections have been chosen for a more compact habit. *Dianella revoluta* Baby Bliss ('Dtm03') is a delicate, clump-forming plant with upright leaves like blue shards, growing to only 50cm (20in) or so. The flowers, with their prominent yellow stamens, are a bonus and may be followed by

pale fruit. *Dianella revoluta* Little Rev ('Dr5000') is perhaps slightly larger and less blue and looks like a small, well-behaved *Phormium*. It appears to be fairly hardy in many southern and western gardens, though is likely to suffer in a harsh winter and is reluctant to produce flowers.

Recently introduced *D. prunina* Utopia ('Dp303') is a cultivar of a species found in dry soils around Sydney. Growing to 2m (6½ft) in the wild, Utopia has been selected for its smaller stature but is said to retain the high, graceful flower stems of the species. It has slaty-blue leaves that twist along their length to reveal a purplish underside. It is reported to be fairly hardy and drought tolerant.

As plants that vary so greatly over their native range, further garden-worthy selections of *Dianella* are bound to reach us over the next few years. Many should make good container plants



Dianella nigra 'Margaret Pringle'



Dianella tasmanica 'Emerald Arch'



Dianella caerulea Little Jess

where their upright lines can stand alone, while, as herbaceous companions to exotic evergreens, they can make an excellent choice. ■

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i Suppliers *Dianella* are increasingly offered at garden centres; nurseries in the *RHS Plant Finder 2009-2010* offering a good range include: Langthorns Plantery, Essex, 01371 872611; Oak Tree Nursery, North Yorkshire, 01757 618409