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Plant a Valentine shrub for your valentine

By Laura Murphy

Want a winter blooming shrub that is drought resistant, evergreen, and will knock your socks off when it blooms? Try planting a shrub called Emu Bush. Its fancy name is *Eremophila maculata* and there are several cultivars available including one called 'Valentine' which should be in bloom for Valentine's Day. This shrub is native to Australia which is where so many interesting plants that are adapted to our climate come from.

Emu bush forms a symmetrical, evergreen mound and will get about 4 feet tall and 4-5 feet wide. It has small rounded green leaves. With cooler weather the leaves will become tinged with red. Although this shrub is very drought tolerant it will need some supplemental water here in the low desert. With minimal irrigation the leaves will be smaller and a gray green color and the blossoms will not be as abundant. With a little more irrigation it will become a show stopper when it blooms.



You should plan on planting this beauty in full sun, and it will even take reflected sun from walls, concrete and pools. This shrub is used in the small planting islands at the city office building parking area, across from the police station. Not only are they doing well there, they are thriving. It is not fussy about soil type but make sure the drainage is good.

Pruning is optional. If you don't prune the growth habit will be more open and angular. With pruning, a more dense and bushy plant will result. In addition, since the flowers are born on new, young wood, an annual shearing will guarantee a more prolific bloom. This is probably best done in March. This will be after the heavy bloom cycle but will give the plant enough time to fill out to protect itself before the summer heat hits.

Now let me tell you about the flowers. "Wow" is the best word to describe a bush in full bloom. Each branch is covered with dozens of tubular shaped flowers that are reminiscent of a fuchsia blossom. Flower color is usually red or pink-red. Flowering starts in January and will reach its peak in February for Valentine's Day and taper off in March. With a longer, cooler spring, flowering may continue into April.



Uses are easy to come up with for this Aussie beauty. It is drought tolerant enough to be planted in with other desert adapted plants but will become a striking contrast when in bloom. Its show stopping flowering season comes at a time when there are not a lot of other spectacular plants in bloom. It is suitable for areas with extreme conditions such as along south western facing walls and along streets or driveways. Unlike many desert adapted plants, the Emu bush has no thorns. This makes it suitable for planting along walkways and sitting areas. A single bush can act as a specimen in winter time but then blend into the background later in the year when other plants are showier.

This tough, undemanding shrub has been used in many commercial applications for some time. The Emu bush is now just gaining in popularity and becoming increasingly available to homeowners. This Valentine's day, give your Valentine the gift of a shrub that will bloom during Valentine's Day for years to come.

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