

## hot talent



**Takeshi Miyakawa is gaining international recognition** for his furniture designs. His whimsically titled Affordable Housing filing cabinet is a fine example of his ability to see a new way to approach an old tired subject. See [www.tmiyakawadesign.com](http://www.tmiyakawadesign.com)

## outdoors



**Calotropis procera** makes an interesting garden plant, but its abundance in the wild can signal overgrazing. Courtesy Clive Winbow



**Barleria aucheriana** is common on Oman's low hills and coastal wadis and rarely grows taller than 20cm. Courtesy Clive Winbow

# Return of the native

**Gardeners on the Arabian peninsula** can dig in and get back to their country's real roots with Clive Winbow's *The Native Plants of Oman: An Introduction*, and a little bit of his pioneering spirit, writes **Tom Duralia**

It started simply enough. He just wanted a wadi to call his own. A garden to reflect some of the area's "heroically resilient and beautiful wild flora". A backyard with a connection to its greater surroundings, a backyard with a sense of place.

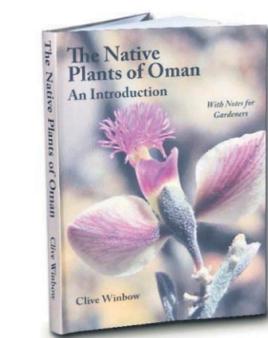
Eighteen years on, Muscat's Clive Winbow has that backyard of native species, as well as the hard-won wisdom that comes with years of trial and error experimentation, planting, propagating and maintaining practically any native species he could get his hands on. He shares 173 of the success stories in a new book: *The Native Plants of Oman: An Introduction*, published by the Environmental Society of Oman, and happily, with the exception of some interesting species from Dhofar, the book might just as easily have been called an introduction to *The Native Plants of the UAE*.

The 127-page text is generously peppered with Winbow's photographs, which the EFL teacher says was one of the reasons he didn't put the book out earlier – he needed the digital camera to come of age.

Species information typically includes where the species grow naturally, some of their ethnobotanical uses, tips on growing and propagating and "any other oddities I came across". Species for which he has a special fondness, or that he sees as particularly valuable for landscapers or gardeners have been given a more generous treatment.

Prior to Winbow's book, would-be native plant gardeners had been largely ignored on the Arabian Peninsula, at least in print. There is an excellent wildflower guide by Marijke Jongbloed to help you get to know the UAE plants, but nothing specific to help you grow them. The book *Gardening in the Middle East* by Eric Moore skirts the topic on a half-page, but with a thoroughly unencouraging text, and only a few suggestions to help you along.

But even with Winbow's book in hand, a bit of his pioneering spirit will still be required to move you along the native garden path. First you'll need to familiarise yourself with the subjects, but the bigger challenge, says Winbow, is simply



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getting the species you want for your garden. "There aren't any native plant nurseries. Most gardeners normally rely on tips from the local nursery, or from next-door neighbours, or internet, friends. Nothing like that exists." To that end, Winbow includes sections in the book on collecting and sprouting seed and propagating from cuttings, noting that a surprising number of non-woody natives will root quite nicely in a glass of water by the kitchen window. He's also quite clear that salvaging by transplant will only work in the rare cases where you find a newly sprouted seedling. And if that seedling has attained a size requiring more than a trowel to move it, you'll only succeed in killing it.

Despite the challenges, Winbow says the rewards, for him at least, are in the joys of discovery. He's come to recognise which plants are versatile in the garden, and which border



**Clive Winbow's native plant guide features 173 species, with 38 hailing from the Dhofar region of southern Oman, including the famous *Boswellia sacra*, also known as frankincense.** Courtesy Clive Winbow

on intransigence. He also delighted in learning that even some species with a severely restricted ecological range in nature, Dhofar's *Boswellia sacra* (frankincense) for example, will sometimes still flourish in his Muscat garden setting, despite the hotter climate and lighter, sandier soil. "Where could you look up and find out information like that?"

Asked for a shortlist of easy-to-grow and relatively easy to obtain favourites for the garden, Winbow puts *Moringa peregrina* at the top, a thornless tree with a "lovely wispy look", also known as the wild drumstick tree or shua'. He devotes a full page to the species in his book, including bits on natural and cultural history as well as photographs documenting the full tree, its leaves, flowers, pods and seeds. He also likes the shrub *Calligonum comosum*, or arta, for its "bright red chandelier fruit" and how well it takes to creative pruning, and the shrub/tree *Sal-*

*vadora persica* (toothbrush, rak) for its spirited show in the heat of summer when most other species are more or less dormant. He remembers loving the drive from Hatta to Dubai with its roadside generously planted with *Salvadora* and *Lep-tadenia pyrotechnica* (markh) as a means of keeping the sand back. He also sees *Euphorbia larica* (isbuc) as a "good value shrub", that "never wants a drop of water and looks pretty the whole time", and the national tree of the UAE, *Prosopis cineraria*, the ghaf, as "the king – fully grown ones are majestic". Other favourites include: *Aerva javanica* (for its "fluffy seed heads"), *Ochradenus aucheri* (flowers), *Tephrosia nubica* and *T. apollinea* (pea flowers), *Tamarix aphylla* ("wispy atmosphere"), *Dodonaea viscosa* ("strange flowers and seeds"), *Pterospyrum scoparium* ("bright green foliage"), *Pergularia tomentosa* (a climbing shrub that is "great fun in a pot"), *Cissus quad-*

*rangularis* (a climber from Dhofar), *Barleria aucheriana* and *Polygala muscatense* (both with beautiful flowers, but neither native in the UAE).

Whether by accident or intention, Winbow's top picks are mostly trees or shrubs, but that meshes well with his advice for rookie native plant gardeners: "Get trees established first. The partial shade they provide is so vital for shrubs at a later stage." He also recommends mulching around young plants with stones and rocks, noting that any measure that will lower the soil temperature is a good thing. And while he sees no place or need for inorganic fertilisers in the native garden, he does favour composting kitchen scraps, yard trimmings, even goat manure, though he cautions not to incorporate it until well-rotted. He sees compost not so much as a fertiliser, but as a means to moderate the high alkalinity of Gulf soils, as well

## \* tipsheet

All young plants need help and attention, whether native or not. They need shade, moisture and good drainage. Plants will also appreciate some organic matter mixed into the soil, such as decomposed kitchen scraps. Don't waste them.

Mulch around young plants with stones, rocks, gravel or organic matter. A surface layer 5-8 cm deep can dramatically improve growing conditions.

Water away from your plant stems; instead, water under branch tips where the roots are most likely to be. Roots won't grow into dry soil.

If you keep cats, your garden will not become a haven for wildlife (birds, geckos, insects) even with your native plantings. You'll have to choose.

*Prosopis cineraria* (ghaf) is not a slow-growing tree.

as an aid to the soil's ability to retain some moisture.

For the enthusiastic gardener ready to dig in and go native now, Winbow advises a little patience. You've missed the window. December is the best time to do any plantings for full sun; any later and those plants just won't have enough time to get their roots down deep before summer hits. So use the time to get to know the species, get out botanising with the Emirates Natural History Groups (ENHG), and start honing your horticultural skills for post-summer activity. Or, and who knows how this will go over, gather your like-minded friends and start nagging the local nurseries to propagate more native plants.

● *The Native Plants of Oman: An Introduction* is currently available in the UAE for Dh80 through book stalls at ENHG meetings in Abu Dhabi and Al Ain