

Eremophila - The Emu Bush



Imagine desolate rocky outcrops lashed by searing winds. Picture if you can, an ocean of blood red sand dunes stretching to the horizon in every direction. Try to visualize barren dry watercourses overhung by graceful weeping trees. These are the places in Australia where white men can barely survive and many have perished lost in the wilderness, are the places where *Eremophilas* are found.

Eremophilas are an enormously diverse group of plants, varying from flat self-layering groundcovers to jewel-like compact shrubs, to graceful broom-like shrubs, to very flowery small weeping trees. There are more than 200 named species in a myriad of different forms and over one thousand showy cultivars, with many more yet to be given scientific names. Leaf color in *Eremophilas* can vary from snowy white, to soft gray, to blue green, to lettuce green, to shades of silver. Their tubular flowers are a riot of color including spotted white, to soft pink, every shade of red, yellow, orange, burgundy, hot purple, soft blue, deep blue, violet, indigo and even blackish shades. Some flowers are surrounded by colorful bracts that make them appear to be doubles. Within *Eremophila*, many species are specialized to attract birds wherever they are planted in the world, while over a hundred species are very attractive to insects.

Eremophila is derived from two Greek words, *eremos* meaning desert or lonely places, and *philos* meaning to love. *Eremophila* means desert loving. Common names for these plants include Emu bush, Poverty bushes and even Desert Pride. Poverty bush refers to the ability of many to survive in very dry, inhospitable environments.

All species are endemic (occur only here) to Australia and they are generally plants of semi-arid to arid regions. The plants do produce rather hard dry fruits often eaten by birds and animals. The common name, Emu bush, derives from the erroneous belief that fruits are commonly eaten by emus which is not true. Some also believed that the passage through the bird aided in germination which also seems to be false. Despite the fact that very few of the species are eaten by emus, the name has stuck.

Eremophila is part of a larger family of about 5 genera known as Myoporaceae. The members of this genera are usually small to medium shrubs although a few may be large shrubs or small trees. Those species which occur in the harshest of climates have developed methods to cope with the severe conditions. Many have grayish, hairy foliage which reflect the sun's rays while other have a shiny, sticky coating on the foliage as a protection against drying winds.

Flowers are more or less tubular with upper and lower lips and are reasonably large, often very colorful sometimes spotted. In some species, the corolla (the tube of petals) may also have a large and attractive calyx (those parts below the petals). These features have resulted in a number of species being cultivated as ornamental plants in suitable climates. Flowers occur in the leaf axils. Leaves can be either alternate or opposite.

Once established, they are very drought tolerant and rarely require much artificial watering. With many different forms, growth habits and flower colors, *Eremophilas* can be used for many different purposes in the garden. In addition, the flowers of many species produce nectar and are excellent for attracting birds.

In cultivation, all species perform best in well-drained soils and rarely succeed in continually wet soils. Shallow clay soils can present problems. Many species tolerate alkaline soils. *Eremophilas* are generally at their best in open, sunny positions with good air circulation. Many are adaptable to humid climates but those with hairy foliage may be subject to fungal diseases in those areas and are best avoided.

Emu bushes are not demanding as far as fertilization is concerned but do respond to applications of slow release fertilizer after flowering. If desired, the plants can be pruned back by about one third after flowering to promote a bushy habit of growth.

Most occur in semi-arid and arid regions in deep sands, rocky and gravelly loams and mostly in areas of neutral to alkaline pH. Some are capable of surviving for periods of 1-2 years without rainfall

Some are ground hugging and can form roots at nodes. Some have even been used for medicinal purposes.

Basic cultivation requirements are good to excellent drainage and usually plenty of sun. They do not appreciate long periods of overcast humid weather and usually prove unsuccessful in moist tropical and high rainfall temperate zones.

Most species will tolerate light to medium frosts while differences are exhibited in hardiness depending upon the origin of the species in Australia

with inland forms more hardy than coastal forms.

In wetter areas, better drainage has been provided by planting them on built-up soil mounds. *Eremophila laanii* and *racemosa* have benefited from this procedure in wetter areas.

They can also make excellent container plants in areas where the climate may be unsuitable. Scale insects can be a problem especially on species with sticky branches and leaves.


General observations include:

- Few diseases and fungi attack this group in the southwest. Even though the soil is neutral with a pH ranging around 8, there usually are no signs of chlorosis. Root rot has not seemed to be a problem.
- There seem to be no insect pests other than an occasional scale or aphid. Rodents could cause a problem.
- Early establishment of these plants is critical to later growth. Plants that were planted in root-bound condition or were not given adequate watering the first season have difficulty getting established.
- It is usually easier to get them established in heavier soils than in sandy soils but those heavier soils need to be well drained.
- If they are to be planted in sandy soils, mulching may help to push roots down to where there is available moisture.

Just in case you might have been concerned about the potential for invasive behavior, *Eremophilas* set fertile seed infrequently, and this seed is notoriously difficult to germinate, thus they are unlikely to ever become weeds. The cultivation of eremophilas in their myriad varieties is habit forming however and is best treated by planting more of them. We hope you enjoy these wonderful treasures, which are amongst the crown jewels of Australian plants.

Here is a list of frequently grown species of the *Eremophila*.

Hitting on the thumbnail picture will bring up the larger version.

If a  is present, there is also an information sheet available

***Eremophila decipiens*-Slender Fuchsia**

	3-6' x 3-6' A small shrub with young growth as well as branches usually sticky and becoming glabrous (shiny). Leaves are alternate, linear to lanceolate with flowers that are red and glabrous. It has proven to be one of the most reliable and
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glabrous. It has proven to be one of the most reliable and frequently cultivated of the species adapting well to most soils provided there is good drainage. It will thrive in dappled shade to full sun, is frost hardy and will take extended periods of drought. It can also be used as a great container plant. It is sometimes confused with forms of *Eremophila glabra* which do not have S shaped pedicels. It is not as showy as some selections but is quite dependable if not very readily available. This little gem will keep the hummingbirds humming in your garden

***Eremophila glabra* 'Murchinson River'-Fire and Ice**



The species may be quite prostrate to 4' tall by 3-9' wide forming a dwarf to small shrub with branches faintly to densely hairy giving them a whitish appearance. Flowers can be tubular green, yellow, orange or red. This species is extremely variable and complex and some have adapted well to cultivation provided drainage is adequate. The cultivar, 'Murchinson River', is a cultivar with silvery foliage and bright red flowers that has been used in Phoenix for many years with limited success. Our plant introduction guru, George Hull, received this cultivar and 'Pink Beauty' from Mike Krantz, a salesperson for a nursery that decided not to produce them in late 70s. It often suffers an early death in Phoenix, perhaps due to poor drainage and the results of over watering. It has experienced frost damage at 21°F. Some nurseries incorrectly refer to the cultivar as 'Fire and Ice' which is a great descriptive name for a cultivar but really only a common name. It would be happier in an area with nearly no additional moisture applied. All forms of *Eremophila glabra* are bird friendly and can be pruned mercilessly.

***Eremophila laanii* 'Pink Beauty'**

This species has been often mislabeled as another species. It has been in the Phoenix area nearly 25 years having been introduced by George with all of the present plants in Arizona and Nevada arising from this fortunate trade. It is a medium sized spreading shrub 5-8' by the same with branches often entangled and even pendulous. The green foliage is reminiscent of

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myoporum parviflorum, with narrow, bright green leaves set closely along the arching branches. The flowers on this cultivar are pink while there do exist others in white or reddish pink. It is one of the most adaptable species in cultivation preferring plenty of light, is frost hardy and able to handle extended drought periods. In Phoenix, the original plants still survive on no applied water but will look best with a bit more than that. Where there is room, this shrub can provide a lush and distinctive look. It is hardy to 25°F and listed as USDA zone 9.

After this plant becomes older and develops a woody branching structure, cutting it to the ground in the cooler parts of the season, will induce a new vigorous plant. Birds love *Eremophila laanii* and *Eremophila laanii* loves to be pruned.

***Eremophila maculata*-Spotted Emu Bush**



Virtually every salt lake margin, every dry watercourse and every clay pan in arid inland Australia has its population of *Eremophila maculata* in a myriad of sizes, shapes and flower colors. *Eremophila maculata* has also been known to hybridize with *Eremophilas glabra*, *duttoni*, *deciptens* and other bird pollinated species.

This is probably the most common species both in the wild and in cultivation. This species can range from dwarf to medium sized shrubs from less than 2' tall to 9' tall by 3-9' wide. Shrubs are dense with rigid branches with their flowers whitish to deep pale pink, red to purplish red, yellow or even orange often with a pale spotted throat. Flowering occurs mainly through winter and spring but some flowers may occur at other times. The pedicels (that lil thing holding the flower onto the stem) are glabrous and S shaped which helps to distinguish this from other species in many cases.

It is renowned for its variation in flower color and in growth habit. It usually occurs in habitat on heavier soil types to sandy soils and this probably adds to its ability to survive and prosper in our artificial landscapes. It is relatively frost hardy and can take extended periods of drought. This species has been introduced into horticulture for many years having been in the British Isles as early as 1820.

***Eremophila maculata* Winter Gold™**

In the early 1980s, this treasure was collected at Calperum

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station in South Australia's river land in a hybrid swarm of several species. This unique selection has long since become extinct in its natural habitat but is very popular in cultivation.



This cultivar is a medium sized shrub reaching about 4-5' tall by up to 6' in width. Leaves are narrow and dark green contrasting with the bright yellow flowers produced in late winter into early spring. This species is one of the most commonly grown due to its reliable nature. It has a spreading habit much like the Valentine™ Bush and is easily kept under five feet in height. It will grow best in full sun handling some partial shade. It seems to be able to grow well in heavy soils. This is one of the new selections being added to the Mountain States' *Eremophila* family. Unbelievably, it is also tolerant of repeated pruning practices, as new blooms occur on new wood. This one may fit right in the landscape that is manicured too frequently. Birds attracted by these plants make gardens alive and contribute significantly to insect pest control.

Eremophila maculata Valentine™



This is a favorite plant for those seeking an early start to spring. It is an evergreen shrub that begins blooming in January, peaking in color just in time for Valentine's Day. The lipstick red, tubular flowers have made this an extremely popular plant since we first introduced it to the Southwest. We have offered this plant for a number of years now and our customers have been pleased with its modest growth habit to 4 by 5 feet, and hardiness to 15°F. The leaves are small, rounded and typically green except during winter when the leaves may take on a reddish cast. As with most *Eremophilas*, it prefers good drainage. This is an excellent plant for streetscapes, golf courses and other commercial properties with open terrain and full sun.

If left unpruned, it has a natural form very similar to that of the Chihuahuan sage (*Leucophyllum laevigatum*). However, it responds well to shearing, and can be maintained in a tight ball, if desired. In fact, blooming occurs on new tip growth produced the previous season, so an annual shearing is recommended in late spring, after flowering has ended. Plant it in full sun for best growth and flower production. USDA Zone 8. Valentine™ can also make a great container plant in areas where it might not care for being planted outside in the ground. 🍀

***Eremophila racemosa*-Easter Egg Eremophila**

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Eremophila racemosa is a fire response species from the edge of the West Australian wheatbelt, which peters out in the wild about 10 years after it germinates. Currently it is very close to extinction in its native habitat.

Commonly known as the Easter Egg Bush, this jewel of a shrub has a profusion of brightly colored flowers predominately in the spring and continuing through the growing season. The tubular buds start out as yellow, turning orange and as they develop they mature to a pink and lavender purple. Talk about a riot of color! Everyone seems to get excited about this introduction. With a more erect form than the Valentine™, this *Eremophila* will grow to about 4 to 6 feet tall.



Racemus, a bunch of grapes, gives rise to the term racemosa describing how the flowers appear along the stem. This species has a very restricted natural occurrence in Australia. The branches are usually borne erectly and are glabrous. The narrow leaves are pale green. The pedicels (the part that holds the flower on the stem) may be straight or S shaped as in the species, maculata. This is a very showy species being upright and most colorful while in flower with its various shades of yellow, orange, pink red and purple. Flowering is heaviest in spring but will occur intermittently till cold weather sets in. Soil needs to be relatively well-drained and in full sun and it does need some protection from wind as it can blow over. Tip pruning might be necessary to promote bushiness. It makes an excellent container plant. The names *E. racemosa bicolor* and *E. bicolor* are no longer used and both refer to this species. It is hardy to 25°F becoming more tolerant of frost when established and is listed in USDA zone 9. It might be short lived in more humid areas. 🍀

Eremophila polyclada-

About 1700 miles of the giant upper Murray Darling basin in heavy sometimes salt affected soils is the home of *Eremophila polyclada*. Polyclada refers to its many branches. This species is mentioned as it is one of the parents of one of the new introductions into the trade that Mountain States has been responsible for, Summertime Blue™.



A rounded arching bright green shrub with fine foliage covered with massed white spotted flowers, hovering above the plant like summer butterflies. It is an inland species usually occurring in heavy soils which are subject to flooding. It is very adaptable to cultivation on a variety of soils, is hardy to periods of extended

drought and most frosts. It will grow into a wide spreading mound.

Eremophila divaricata




Eremophila divaricata is found in the lower end of the Murray Darling basin and intersects with *Eremophila polyclada* near Lake Walla Walla in Victoria, Australia, with many showy busy hybrids. This small shrub has blue green branches often entwined with tubular blue to lilac flowers. It is a species from the flood plains usually occurring on soils of medium to heavy texture. It is hardy to extended dry periods and most frosts. This is the second parent to our new, Summertime Blue™.

Eremophila polyclada x divaricata **Summertime Blue™**



From the two species, above described came this new Mountain States introduction into the landscapes of the southwest. As can happen, the child can far surpass either of the parents. Summertime Blue™ will do just that providing lilac-blue tubular flowers from spring till the end of summer on a large spreading shrub which will peak at about 6' tall by around 10' in diameter. It is evergreen as the other species, will survive in Phoenix on nearly no additional moisture, is pest free and fairly quick growing. Being it is more of a wide spreading selection, room should be provided for its growth, which can be described as fountain-like. We have been trialing this plant in our Phoenix nursery for over ten years since the original plant came to us after having been discovered by a friend of the nursery in his nursery in Australia. There might be other plants in the trade now, being that we have been trialing it here for such a long time but there are also some selections not performing as well. Summertime Blue™ can only be obtained from Mountain States.

Having originated from heavy soils in habitat, it is well adapted to the clayey soils of the southwest. Hardy to frost and extended dry periods, this gem will be a great addition to the line-up of emu bushes. Hardy to 25°F it is listed in USDA Zone 9. Hack it, prune it into a formal hedge, or just enjoy it in its natural shape, this little beauty will grow in wet or dry soils. 

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