



Featuring pretty, white flowers, 'Peace Baby' is one of a new generation of tibouchinas.

tibouchina ... shock of the new

One man's innovation, skills and years of dedication have resulted in the creation of a groundbreaking new range of tibouchinas ... and not just in purple! CLAIRE BICKLE reports.

Tibouchinas in bloom are hard to miss, with their vivid purple flowers making a truly spectacular floral display. However, these large shrubs or small trees aren't grown just for their flowers. They are renowned for being a tough, easy-care plant with ornamental leaves and few pest or disease problems.

Tibouchinas hail from the subtropical south-east of Brazil. Some older gardeners will know them by their old botanical name, *Lasiandra*, or even as glory bush. The most common species is *Tibouchina granulosa*, a small evergreen tree that grows to 10m and is often planted as a street tree. Like most tibouchinas, it flowers from late summer to early winter, although in warmer areas this can extend to spring. There are also less common species, such as *T. mutabilis*, which flower in spring and early summer.

Although some lesser-known tibouchinas are pink and white, most of the varieties traditionally available to gardeners have had purple flowers. This is because they were the most common varieties and, as it is so difficult to propagate tibouchinas by seed, they were only propagated by cuttings. Hence, the colour has remained essentially the same.

Old favourites

There have been a few cultivars developed in the past, which have become firm garden favourites. *T. lepidota* 'Alstonville' is one of the most loved, growing to about 4m tall and bearing striking iridescent purple flowers. Smaller-growing cultivars, such as 'Jules' and 'Jazzie', grow to no more than 1m tall.

Other old favourites include 'Kathleen', which grows to 5m tall and has mauve-pink blooms, and *T. mutabilis* 'Noelene', growing to 3m with late spring and early summer flowers, which open white and turn mauve-pink as they age.

Now, thanks to the expertise, patience and perseverance of innovative Australian plant breeder Terry Keogh, there are new varieties available in different colours and heights, and with cold tolerance and extended flowering. This is great news for gardeners everywhere.

Fabulous new varieties

Terry Keogh has worked in the horticultural industry for decades. Starting out in a Brisbane retail nursery, he became frustrated by people asking if tibouchinas came in colours other than purple. So, when he started his own wholesale nursery, he embarked on a mission to breed tibouchinas in new colours and sizes, and with more compact growth habits.

The first problem was mastering the release of the pollen from the flowers. In its natural habitat, the tibouchina is pollinated by hummingbirds, the fast beating of their wings resonating at just the right frequency to release the pollen. Terry had to work out a way to replicate this, and how he did it is a secret he guards closely. He persisted for nearly two decades, sometimes thinking he had exhausted all possibilities before discovering a new avenue to pursue. Eventually, after endless crossings of many seed-raised varieties, Terry's dedication paid off, resulting in one of Australia's greatest plant breeding programs.

Released this spring, the new range of tibouchinas is called Fantasy Flowers (see box, page 24). The five cultivars all flower profusely, peaking in November and continuing through the warmer months. They feature large blooms in different colours and sizes.

Terry is very proud of the compact growth of his varieties and their extended flowering. Ranging from true dwarf to 2.5m tall, all of these varieties maintain a compact bushy growth habit. This means they are much more useful, with varieties that are suitable to plant at the front of a garden, as specimen plants, and even as a dense, clipped hedge. They are also absolutely breathtaking in flower.

During the breeding process, Terry was able to identify some batches that were more cold-tolerant than others, and cross these to produce tibouchinas with selected colours, forms and growth habits. The cold-tolerant cultivars 'Groovy Baby' and 'Peace Baby' are the result. These can be grown as far south as Hobart – not traditional tibouchina territory.

The Fantasy Flowers range has been named one of Australia's most innovative products in the 2012 *Australian Antill Smart 100 Index*. ➔

Terry is proud of the compact growth of his new varieties and their extended flowering periods.



Terry Keogh (above) hasn't finished with tibouchinas. "I hope to have as many varieties of named tibouchina as there are azaleas," he says. He works the old-fashioned way, moving pollen from flower to flower with a paintbrush, collecting seeds, sowing them, and crossing batches of plants until he produces the specimens he's after.

Photos: Plants Management Australia

at a glance

small shrub to small tree

BOTANICAL NAME
Tibouchina spp. ● suitable

great in pots

full sun/semi-shade

plant all year round

45cm-5m 45cm-5m

PLANT OF THE MONTH

This awards program places an emphasis on future-focused innovation, rewarding and recognising the commercial development of great Australian innovations. The Fantasy Flowers range was ranked within the top 50 on the list.

This is a significant acknowledgement of Terry's work, as his tibouchinas were competing with all new products released in Australia this year. The award recognises the innovative colour palette of the plants, their drought hardiness and versatility within the gardening and landscaping environment, and Terry's groundbreaking breeding and propagation techniques.


In the garden

With so many varieties to choose from, old and new, there is now a tibouchina for nearly every spot in the garden. Tibouchinas can be used in the garden as small shade trees or screening shrubs, as feature plantings or low border shrubs, in mixed shrubberies and as specimen plants in both large and small pots.

With most of the newer varieties sporting extended flowering times, they can provide a vibrant splash of colour in any area of the garden you wish to liven up. They would look particularly striking planted alongside orange and red flowers, and the deeply veined leaves add evergreen foliage interest to a garden. They lend themselves to many different styles, from cottage gardens to tropical garden designs.

These shrubs love an acidic, moist soil that is free-draining, and prefer a spot in full sun to semi-shade. They also benefit greatly from a thick layer of mulch over their fibrous root system, especially throughout summer. Choose varieties that suit your climate; all varieties will grow well in a frost-free, warm, sheltered spot.

Lightly clip your plant immediately after flowering. If you wait too long you may have a disappointing flower display next season. Fertilise with a slow-release fertiliser in spring. Pests and diseases are virtually a non-event.

Terry's top tip for getting your tibouchina off to a good start is to water it well during the first four to six weeks after planting. For more details on the new range of tibouchinas, visit Plants Management Australia at pma.com.au 



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FANTASY FLOWERS

Here are the five cultivars in Terry Keogh's new tibouchina range. They are available now.

- 1 **'Peace Baby'** ↑ 60cm ↔ 80cm
This compact bush is ideal for the garden or pots. Terry's favourite for pot culture, it features beautiful white flowers with purple anthers and stamens, and is cold-tolerant.
- 2 **'Allure'** ↑ 1m ↔ 2m
Large lilac flowers adorn this dome-shaped shrub throughout autumn and spring.
- 3 **'Imagine'** ↑ 1.5m ↔ 1.5m
Prolific large purple blooms with a white eye cover this neat, compact shrub during autumn and spring.
- 4 **'Illusion'** ↑ 2.5m ↔ 2.5m
Flowers open white, then develop a pink margin and finally change to a deep pink, with all three colours on the plant at once. It looks fabulous as a tall hedge.
- 5 **'Groovy Baby'** ↑ 45cm ↔ 45cm
This is the most compact tibouchina, with large pure purple flowers. It tolerates cool climates, and is a great choice to grow in pots. Autumn foliage has copper toning.



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