

## Aloe mutabilis

One of the most commonly grown kinds of Aloe in California is *Aloe arborescens*, much admired for its conical spires of flowers, normally red, in mid-winter. However, its close relative *Aloe mutabilis* is very seldom seen in gardens here, differing from its cousin in its smaller size and in its flowers. While *Aloe arborescens* grows to be a large rounded shrub, eventually attaining a height of 8 to 10 feet, *A. mutabilis* develops only a short stem and is seldom more than a few feet high. Plants in nature may have offsets or remain single-headed, but in cultivation this species always seems to form clumps.

The sword-like leaves of *Aloe mutabilis*, green to bluish-green in color and with toothy edges, do not differ significantly from those of its larger relative. In both species, the leaves are softer and more pliable than one might suppose from seeing the plant, and the teeth along the margins are not so sharp as to be a hazard.

Like *Aloe arborescens*, *A. mutabilis* flowers in winter, mainly in January and February at the Ruth Bancroft Garden. The flower spikes of each are normally non-branching, though occasionally there may be a single side branch. Two or three spikes may emerge from a single rosette, and a clump with multiple flower stalks puts on quite a show. The cones of flowers of *A. arborescens* are all of one color, usually red but sometimes yellow or pink. In contrast, the flowers of *A. mutabilis* lighten as they open, creating a pleasing contrast between the red buds and the light yellow of the open flowers. This 2-tone effect is more pronounced in some plants than others.

In nature, *Aloe mutabilis* almost always grows on cliffs or steep rocky slopes, but it will grow quite happily on flat ground as long as it has excellent drainage. It is a little more cold-hardy than *A. arborescens*, enduring temperatures down to the mid-twenties without difficulties. As a result, we are able to grow it without a protective winter cover. As with other Aloe species, this one is attractive to hummingbirds on account of its nectar-filled tubular flowers.

