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photo by Frederick B. Essig

Ornithogalum has its roots in South Africa. See page 24.

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ON THE COVER

Gloriosa lilies work great in sky gardens. See page 12. (Photo by Kathy Nelson)



photo by Kathy Nelson

Showy and very fragrant, angel trumpets are made for sensuous gardens. See page 32.

FLORIDA'S SOUTH AFRICAN ROOTS

by Frederick B. Essig

The plants we grow in Florida come from all over the world, but would you be surprised if I told you that South Africa is the ancestral homeland to hundreds of our common garden plants? Would you believe that the Western Cape Region alone is considered one of the richest floral kingdoms in the world? Perhaps your images of South Africa come from movies featuring either bushmen wandering across great tracts of barren desert or the spectacular animal life of the region. Dry and dusty perhaps, but a botanical paradise?

Those things shaped my image

of South Africa too, so I wasn't fully prepared for the luxuriant display of plant life I found there. As a botanist, I dreamed for years of seeing calla lilies and birds-of-paradise in their native habitats, but didn't expect to find wall-to-wall

carpets of color, vast fields of daisies, or such an incredible variety of gladioli, irises, and other bulb plants. I didn't expect to enter a valley along the south coast and find myself in a lush temperate rain forest filled with moss-draped Podocarpus trees, giant birds-of-paradise (*Strelitzia Nicolai*), and tree ferns. And I didn't expect to see hundreds of miles of unspoiled beach backed by hillsides covered with evergreen chaparral.

In September of 1998, it was my great fortune to attend an international botanical meeting in Capetown, South Africa. September is springtime in the southern hemisphere, and the meeting took place in one of the world's most spectacular botanical gardens, Kirstenbosch, which is devoted entirely to the native plants of the Cape region



photo by Frederick B. Essig

Giant Aloe dichotoma trees stand over fields of daisies.

(www.nbi.ac.za/gardens_kirstenbosch.htm). Following a mild, rainy winter, spring comes and goes here in a frenzy of growth and color before the long, hot, dry summer sets in. The climate and natural vegetation is essentially like that of coastal



photo by Frederick B. Essig

Orange-flowered Clivias brighten gardens in Florida and South Africa.



photo by Frederick B. Essig

The eye-catching blue lily-of-the-Nile, Agapanthus africanus.



A wild ancestor of our common Pelargoniums (geraniums).

California or the French Riviera. Winter and summer temperatures are similar to those in Florida, but the dry summers contrast sharply with our torrentially wet summers.

Many South African plants grow well in Florida, but the wet summers inhibit others. The list of familiar South African plants includes several species of calla lily and bird-of-paradise, along with the blue lily-of-the-Nile (*Agapanthus africanus*), orange



Strelitzia juncea is an unusual bird-of-paradise.

flowered Clivias, hundreds of species of Gladiolus and related "bulb" plants of the Iris family, dozens of species of Pelargonium (called "geraniums" in this country), African daisies such as gazania and arctotus, and numerous succulents, such as Euphorbia, Stapelia, Mesembryanthemum, Lithops, Sansevieria, and Aloe.

South Africans would probably think I was nuts if they heard me say what a thrill it was to see white calla lilies growing as weeds in roadside ditches, marshes, and other wet places around Capetown. Calla lilies are a staple of the florist industry and grow readily in California. I never had them do very well in my central Florida back yard, but after I returned from South Africa I tried again, this time growing them in a pot set in a bucket of water. They loved it, outgrowing the pot in one season and producing beautiful, long-stemmed blossoms in the spring.

The hillsides around Capetown are covered with an evergreen, shrubby vegetation that would be called chaparral in California. South Africans call it Fynbos ("fine bush" in Afrikans), for the fine texture of the foliage. There is great diversity among the shrubs of this vegetation, but the dominant families are the Proteaceae and the Ericaceae.

These shrubby plants are almost impossible to grow in our climate. Many Floridians have been tempted to try the Proteas with their large, spectacular blossoms, but I know of no one who has succeeded for very long.

Bulb plants fare much better, if treated properly during their summer dormancy. Gladiolus, of course, have been bred to do well almost anywhere if their corms are not allowed to freeze, or rot during the summer. South Africa has over 1400 species of bulbous or cormous plants, com-



Calla lilies growing in a marsh at Kirstenbosch.

pared with only 34 in all of California. Although few have been tried in Florida, I suspect that many could be grown in the winter and spring if they were dug up and stored dry during the summer. After my trip, I was inspired to try a bag full of Sparaxis corms that I found on one of those garden shop racks full of plants that don't grow



Hoodia Sp. is a succulent oddity of the milkweed family.

in Florida. Luxuriant winter growth was followed by spring flowers and I had more corms at the end of the season than at the beginning. I allowed their pots to dry out and stay dry all summer,

then started them again in late fall. They again did fantastically. Now I'm set to try a variety of Babianas, Romuleas, Gladioli, Moraeas, and other South African bulb plants that I've found in specialty catalogues.

Another genus that proved to be amazingly diverse in South Africa is Pelargonium, the correct generic name for geraniums. They seem to be particularly fond of rocky places and come in every shade from white through purple and red. Some are weak-stemmed sprawlers; others stout shrublets. There are even species inhabiting



White Ornithogalums growing at a wild-flower reserve.

the inland deserts that have big spines and lose their leaves during the dry season.

I can only mention briefly the vast array of succulents found mostly in the arid Karoo region and along the west coast toward Namibia, particularly Euphorbias and Aloes. The well known *Aloe vera* is just one of many in Africa, the most spectacular of which is the arborescent *Aloe dichotoma* that may stand 20 or

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A dusky Gladiolus growing by the roadside.

more feet tall with a trunk several feet thick. I found the various succulent members of the milkweed family, such as Stapelia, Hoodia, and Huernia, the most fascinating. They look for all the world like cacti, until they bloom. Their often large, star-shaped flowers can be of bizarre coloration and ornamentation, attracting who-knows-what kind of pollinators.

South Africans are keenly aware of their botanical heritage, and this is the only country I've been to where native plants dominate landscapes and flower gardens, at least in the Western Cape Region. There are native plant nurseries everywhere, scores of wildflower preserves, and numerous wildflower shows in the spring. The Tourism Board publishes a free wildflower guide listing the reserves and dates of the shows, and they have a Flowerline with up-to-date wildflower information during the spring season (www.wcape tourism.co.za).

With direct flights from

Miami to Capetown, it's not difficult for Floridians to get to South Africa. Remember to go between August and October for the best wildflower displays. For flower lovers, it will be well worth it.

Dr. Frederick Essig is an Associate Professor of Biology at the University of South Florida in Tampa. He wrote about clematis

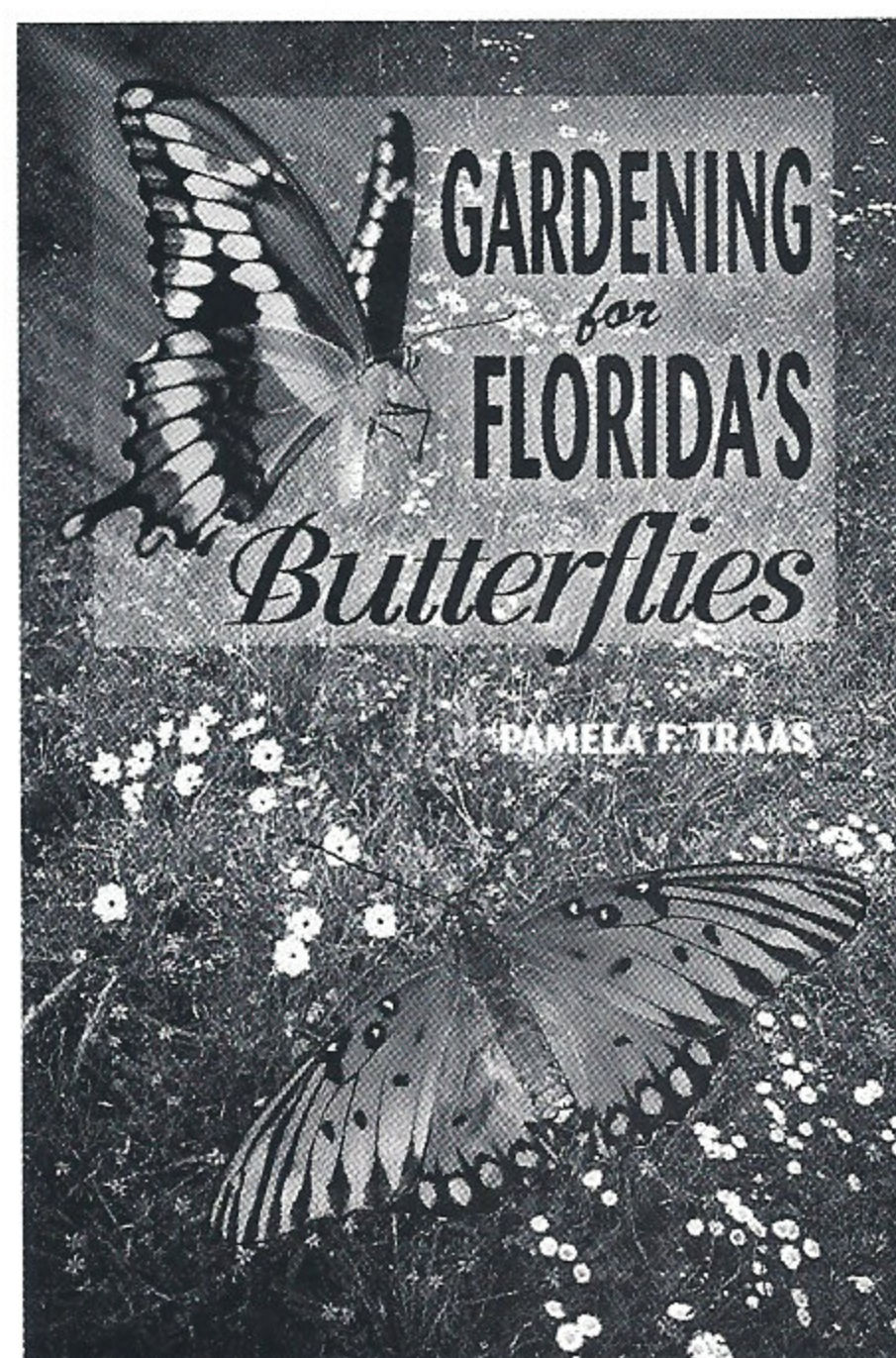
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