

ADVENTURES WITH SOUTH AFRICAN WILDFLOWERS

by Frederick B. Essig

After my visit to South Africa a few years ago, I was irresistibly drawn to try growing some of their spectacular wildflowers here in Florida. Conventional wisdom screamed at me that I was crazy, but I've been there many times before! The most spectacular wildflowers from South Africa are what we call geophytes, plants that can disappear underground during the long dry season and magically reappear during the winter rainy season. Geophytes have underground storage organs that are usually called "bulbs" in the horticultural trade.

We grow a number of spectacular geophytes in Florida. Amaryllis, crinum, Easter lilies, and rain lilies are all true bulbs - onion-like packages of nested scale-leaves - while *Amorphophallus* and *Gladiolus* spring up from solid, squat little stems called corms. Caladiums, gingers, and irises grow mostly from underground rhizomes - thick, horizontal stems that continually extend the colony into new territory.

Drool as we might over the tulips, lilies, and daffodils in mail-order catalogues, our efforts to grow them in Florida are generally doomed, unless we import fresh bulbs every winter. Most require cold temperatures during dormancy, or succumb to fungi and bugs as soon as our

ter. The South African climate ranges from Mediterranean to desert, with rainfall in the winter. Plants there are adapted to survive a long, warm dry season, rather than a cold one. They should find our cool winters perfect for growing and blooming; then survive storage in a hot garage just fine.

South Africa has more geophytes than any other part of the world. A great many of them are in the Iris family, although the true irises are confined primarily to the northern hemisphere. *Gladiolus*, however, is a genus of 250-300 species that occur mostly in Africa. Most of my horticultural success with African wildflowers has been with some of the other irids, such as *Sparaxis*, *Moraea*, *Babiana*, and *Romulea*.

I began my experiments with *Sparaxis*, the wind-

flower. I found some in a local garden center, in one of those racks filled with the sad, dried-up plants in net bags that you just want to take home and give a chance. The *Sparaxis* corms were grateful for the opportunity and have multiplied over the 3 seasons I've had them. Accord-



This orange form of Sparaxis tricolor flowered spectacularly in a Tampa garden.

weather gets warm. Keeping them in the refrigerator during the summer is problematic with respect to maintaining just the right temperature and humidity, not to mention incurring the wrath of spouses!

Geophytes from South Africa, however, are another mat-

photo by Frederick B. Essig

ing to *Hortus III*, there are 6 species of *Sparaxis*, all native to southern Africa, and at least 3 are said to be cultivated. Mine appear to be *S. tricolor*.

I didn't get too many flowers the first year when the plants were confined to pots. The second year I put them in the ground and they flowered spectacularly. I was worried that the corms might rot during the summer, so I dug some up and stored them dry in the garage, while leaving some in the ground. The ones in the ground came up stronger than ever the next winter. Moisture had not been a problem, maybe because the miserable soil in my yard hardly holds any water. (I swear Florida sand is water-repellant!) In more moist soils, I would be concerned about rotting in the summer. But during the growing season, *Sparaxis* responds to good soil, plenty of water, and ordinary fertilization.

Emboldened by my success with *Sparaxis*, I decided to go off the beaten path a bit. I am a member of the North American

Rock Garden Society (www.nargs.org). Few Floridians join this organization because we associate rock gardens with delicate little alpine plants. But if you can find some rocks, you can use local wildflowers, succulents, or just about anything that looks good nestled among rocks. N.A.R.G.S. has an annual seed distribution for members of all kinds of hard-to-find plants. So one year I loaded up on anything I recognized as a South African species, and 2 years later I was getting flowers on several of them.

Moraea is perhaps the most Iris-like of the African irids. Its flowers have the customary 3-part structure with the 3 modified style branches over the stamens. There are over 100 species in this genus, all African, coming in many hues from blue to orange, and some with elaborate floral modifica-



photo by Frederick B. Essig

Orchid-like *Babiana* flowers are borne close to the ground.

tions. More than a dozen are already in general cultivation, with many more in specialty collections or botanical gardens. *M. polystachya* grew well for me, producing a succession of small blue flowers for over 2 months.

Romulea flowers are more conventional in their structure, resembling crocuses or wild tulip species. The genus consists of about 75 species, distributed in warmer parts of the Old World, many of them in South Africa. Only a handful are cultivated. They are certainly worth more attention by Florida gardeners.

Babiana flowers have an orchid-like symmetry, with a lower lip-like petal marked with bright colors. The corrugated leaves also provide an interesting foliage effect. Of the 61 mostly South African species, only 9 were reported by *Hortus III* as cultivated in the U.S., and few



photo by Frederick B. Essig

Seeds of *Romulea flava* yielded lovely flowers in a variety of colors.

are seen in conventional mail-order catalogues.

I must mention *Gladiolus*, of course, although my South African seedlings have not done as well and have not yet bloomed. The common garden gladiolus is the result of so much selection, breeding, and hybridization that it can no longer be identified with any particular species. Colors in this genus range from red to yellow and purple, but with no blues.

In my experience, South African Irids of all sorts grow readily and quickly from seed sown in late fall or winter. The best initial approach is to grow them in containers that can be stashed in a dry place during the summer. The hundreds of species in that country offer an intriguing opportunity for experimentation in Florida, with minimal risk of introducing nuisance invasives.



photo by Frederick B. Essig

A lovely pink form of windflower (Sparaxis).

Some South African plants have become weeds in Western Australia and California, but they are unlikely to tolerate our wet summers in the long run. Caution is always advisable, though, and exotic plants should never knowingly be introduced into the wild.

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SUGGESTED READING

The Color Encyclopedia of Cape Bulbs

John C. Manning, Peter Goldblatt, Dee Snijman
Timber Press, 2002

Gladiolus in Southern Africa

Peter Goldblatt, J. Manning
Fernwood Press, 1998



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A solitary flower of Romulea atrandra.



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