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photo by Tom Hewitt

Choosing plants wisely can produce handsome results. See page 12.

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ON THE COVER

Climbing Gloriosa lilies lend their charms to easy-care gardens. See page 20.
(Photo by Ana Eire)



photo by Frederick B. Essig

Gladiolus cardinalis is a spectacular relative of our common garden glads. See page 16.

IRIS FAMILY GEMS FROM SOUTH AFRICA

by Frederick B. Essig

When I started growing South African plants 10 years ago, I thought that our summer rains would surely do them in. In the Cape Province of South Africa, which has arguably the most spectacular spring flora in the world, summers are hot and dry, winters cool and rainy. So many of the plants there, like *Gladiolus* and other members of the Iris family, are adapted to go dormant during the summer. I feared that the dormant corms would rot in the ground from our heavy rains.

Happily, that proved not to be the case for most of the specimens growing in the wretched sandy soil of my backyard. In fact, the poor soil probably saves them. Even in summer, moisture doesn't remain long in the sand. For once, my official gardening philosophy of benign neglect seems to have paid off.

Though they are often confused with bulbs, the dormant underground structures of most genera in the Iris family are, in fact, corms (though many kinds

of iris have rhizomes). Bulbs, like onions, are made of layers of modified storage leaves, while corms are solid swollen stems. This may be why they are so successful in surviving many months in hot, bone-dry soil.



Gladiolus tristis produces nice open clusters of cream-colored flowers.

True bulbs, though well-adapted to survive cold winters, are presumably more prone to desiccation where summers are dry.

The Iris family in the northern hemisphere is represented by many species of *Iris*,

Crocus and blue-eyed grass (*Sisyrinchium*). From Latin America we get *Tigridia*, the "walking iris" *Neomarica* and a few lesser-known genera. Floridians grow some irises, but can only dream about crocuses.

Neomarica is vigorous and hardy in Florida, but *Tigridia* is rarely grown here. The flora of southern Africa provides an opportunity to expand our repertoire of this fascinating family.

The big winners in my garden of neglect are species of *Babiana*, *Gladiolus*, *Sparaxis* and *Moraea*. A number of others didn't survive, notably the tulip-like *Romuleas*. Perhaps the summer rains or insufficient winter rains did them in. Last winter we had abundant rain and the plants were ecstatic. *Sparaxis tricolor*, which had mustered only a few scraggly flowers in recent years, was spectacular last

spring. In the future, I will modify my philosophy and provide them with more water in the winter!

The *Babianas* have steadily multiplied into large clumps over the years, but even they have not



photo by Frederick B. Essig

Moraea papilionacea has intriguing iris-like flowers painted in pastel tones.

bloomed with much enthusiasm. Flowers of the fragrant *Babiana odorata* are often the first to come out, usually in late February or March, and they were in fine form last year. The blue *Babiana ambigua* burst forth with numerous flowers from the bases of the leafy clusters a few weeks later. Another 60 or so African species of this genus beckon to us.

A real prize last year was a number of fine stalks of the fragrant *Gladiolus tristis*, each bearing 6 or more cream-colored blossoms. They have been quietly growing over the years, but scarcely flowering. To me, the loosely-presented blossoms of the wild species are much more elegant than the crowded, garish spikes of conventional garden glads, which never look as good once the lower flowers have withered. With 225 species in Africa, Madagascar, Mediterranean Europe and the Middle East, there are many *Gladiolus* to experiment with. I have a gut feeling that the spectacular red-flowered *Gladiolus cardinalis* will grow here given the right conditions.

Another delight in April and early May last year

was a fine display of the delicate blue flowers of *Moraea polyanthos*. *Moraea* consists of at least 100 species, all from Africa. *M. papilionacea* survived a few years, then never came back. Too wet? Too dry? Hard to say, but I'm guessing it was the dry winters. Though they are wild plants from a dry part of the world, clearly they respond to a little TLC and can handle conventional watering during their growing season.

The spectacular displays of flowers during a wet winter along with the survival of the corms year after year in our poor soil, suggest there is great potential for these African relatives of iris. *Sparaxis* is commercially available and comes in many colors. It deserves much wider planting in Florida. Many *Gladiolus*, *Babiana* and *Moraea* species are available from specialty sites on the internet, and you can join societies, such as the North American Rock Garden Society (www.nargs.org, PO Box 18604, Raleigh, NC 27619), that have annual seed exchanges that include South African plants. Even these represent only the tip of the iceberg, though. Do an image search for *Gladiolus* on Google and prepare for your eyes to drop out. Do the same for *Babiana* and



photo by Frederick B. Essig

Moraea polyanthos puts out sprays of dainty blue flowers every spring.

Moraea, or for dozens of other genera in the family. For wild species of gladioli, see the spectacular book, *Gladiolus in Southern Africa*, by Goldblatt and Manning.

The Iris family is one of the few that offers brilliant, saturated reds, blues, yellows and everything in between, mixed in endless combinations among wild species. Without intense breeding, true solid blues are hard to come by in the orchid, rose, cactus, poppy, amaryllis and hibiscus families, bright yellows are rare in geraniums and morning glories and pure reds are not to be found in daylilies, magnolias or water-lilies. The Iris family, however, has mastered the chemistry of the full rainbow.

Is there a danger in growing

new exotic species in our state, which is already heavily contaminated with weeds from other continents? Yes, but I think it is low for these kinds of plants. They are non-aggressive, slow growing and unlikely to invade the Everglades or threaten other wild areas. Exercise caution, though, and watch for signs that they are spreading beyond their designated space.

These few genera of the Iris family are just the eyes and nostrils of the alligator (to avoid the usual iceberg cliché). There are also hundreds of species of

Pelargonium and *Oxalis* in southern Africa, along with succulents rivaling the diversity and beauty of the cactus family, innumerable kinds of daisies, flowering shrubs, carnivorous plants and more. There are more botanical tales from South Africa to be told!



photo by Frederick B. Essig

Sparaxis tricolor was spectacular last spring.

Dr. Essig, an Associate Professor of Biology at USF in Tampa, first wrote about the South African roots of many of our favorite plants in Florida Gardening, Jun/Jul 2000.

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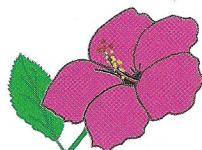
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Babiana ambigua blooms faithfully every year and has multiplied into large clumps.

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