

The Southern African Bulb Group

Newsletter No. 2
Early Spring 2005



The Southern African Bulb Group was initiated by a group of enthusiasts on April 4th 2004. The objective of the group is to further the understanding of the cultivation of Southern African bulbs, where 'bulbs' is used in the broad sense to encompass bulb-, corm- and tuber- possessing Southern African plants, including 'dicots' such as Oxalis. In the first instance the group will be run on an informal basis, with an initial subscription of £5 invited from participants.

Committee: Robin Attrill (Membership secretary and Newsletter editor), Margaret Corina (Treasurer), Stefan Rau and Terry Smale

Editorial

This second issue of the newsletter contains preliminary details of the next meeting of the group to be held on April 9th 2005, a summary of the meeting of the group held at David Victors home on 23rd October 2004, an updated list of suppliers of seed and bulbs/corms of Southern African geophytes, an article on *Empodium*, and a members 'wants' list. The group welcomes articles, and suggestions, for inclusion in future newsletters. Very little material has been received for inclusion to date, and it vital that this situation improves for the newsletter to be sustainable. Contributions (handwritten, typewritten and electronic are acceptable!) should be sent to the newsletter editor at 17 Waterhouse Moor, Harlow, Essex, CM18 6BA (Email Robin@rpattrill.freeserve.co.uk) Publication of the next issue is scheduled for mid-March 2005.

Forthcoming visit to Rupert Bowlby - Saturday 9th April 2005

The next meeting of the group will take the form of a visit to Rupert Bowlby's nursery near Reigate on 9th April 2005. There will also be a talk, details of which will be confirmed in the next newsletter, along with directions and details of the arrangements for the day.

Report on visit to David Victor - Saturday 23rd October 2004

On Saturday, 23rd October, 2004 the group were fortunate to have the opportunity to visit the garden of David and Pat Victor near Leighton Buzzard. The weather was somewhat inclement but this did not prevent a good turnout, with approximately half of the group membership taking the opportunity to view David's extensive plant collections.

For many the highlight of the day was the opportunity to see an extensive range of autumn blooming South African *Oxalis* in flower, with tuberous *Pelargonium*, principally from section *Hoarea*, also providing interest.

In some quarters Southern African geophytes have a tendency to prompt debates (sometimes forceful, and frequently rather pointless!) around the concept of 'hardiness'. In this context was interesting to note that David's principal greenhouse, a 10m x 4m Cambridge Planthouse, receives no artificial heating. Instead selected areas within it receive local protection by the use of a bubble wrap (north side) and fleece covering, supported on frameworks, over certain bench areas during the period late December to early March. Plant losses using this protocol were reportedly minimal

In addition to the viewing of David's plants a good selection were brought for display by members, including several pots of *Empodium* which form the subject of a separate item in this newsletter. The plant sales table was also well stocked (and scrutinized).

Whilst the day was a great success it is clear that more formal arrangement of such events, and associated plant sales etc, would be desirable. If any member is willing to take on responsibility for meeting/excursion organization please make themselves known to a member of the committee!

Updated list of Suppliers of Southern African Bulbs

An updated list of sources is given below. Once again I would ask that if you have experience of other reliable sources please send details for inclusion in a future expanded list.

UK based suppliers

- **Jim & Jenny Archibald** (‘Bryn Collen, Ffostrasol, Llandysul, SA44 5SB, Wales, UK)
(Seed of selected species. catalogue online at <http://www.jjaseeds.com/>)
- **Rupert Bowlby** (The Bulb Nursery, Gatton, Reigate, Surrey, RH2 0TA)
Bulbs &corms of selected species. Catalogue available on request from Rupert at Rupert.Bowlby@care4free.net . Website <http://www.rupert.bowlby.care4free.net/>
- **Great Western Gladiolus** Email: clutton.glads@btinternet.com
Listing includes a number of South African taxa.
- **Monocot Nursery** (St Michaels, Littleton, Somerton, Somerset, TA11 6NT, UK)
(Seed and bulbs of selected species)
- **Terry Smale** (28 St. Leonards Rd, Epsom Downs, Surrey, KT18 5RH, UK)
An interesting selection of Southern African taxa offered by a member of this group - Catalog online at <http://www.smale1.demon.co.uk/index.htm>

South African suppliers

- **Silverhill Seeds** (PO Box 53108, Kenilworth, 7745, Cape Town, RSA)
(Extensive range of seed, catalogue online at www.silverhillseeds.co.za Please note that the paper catalogue has been continued, the nursery is suspending sales during the mid winter months, and the focus of the listings will apparently in future place more emphasis on Western Cape taxa)
- **Rust-en-Vrede Nursery** (PO Box 753, Brackenfell, 7561, RSA)
(A very good list of seed and corms)
- **Gordon Summerfield** (PO Box 5150, Helderberg, Somerset West, 7135, RSA)
(A fine list of seed and corms, many with provenance data)
- **African Bulbs** (P.O. Box 26, Napier 7270, RSA)
(Catalogue of selected Eastern Cape and Western Cape bulbs and seeds online at www.africanbulbs.com/ Formerly known as The Croft Wild Bulb Nursery)

In addition to the above a number of society seed distribution schemes, including those of the International Bulb Society, the Indigenous Bulb Association of South Africa, the Alpine Garden Society and the North American Rock Garden Society can be productive sources of material although misidentification is a frequent problem.

A formerly useful source, the Botanical Society of South Africa, has recently withdrawn seed distribution to overseas members. Requests to the society to explain the rationale for this have gone unanswered. Purchasing from the Kirstenbosch seed list is still possible but the range of species available is limited

Empodium – by Terry Smale

Empodium is a small genus of about seven species in the *Hypoxidaceae*; a family that is better-known for the *Rhodohypoxis* which grow on the Drakensberg. The Color Encyclopedia of Cape Bulbs describes five winter- growing species from the Cape Floral Kingdom and these all produce bright yellow star-like flowers in the autumn. I have only flowered two species but each corm of these produces a succession of flowers over a long period, at a time of the year when there are few other SA bulbs in flower apart from the amaryllids. The flowers have very long tubes which can either come straight out of the ground like a crocus or be on a short peduncle. One of my species, *E. gloriosum*, does not push its ovary above ground even when mature. I only discovered the seed capsules adjacent to the corms when they were repotted; a feature that might contribute to the scarcity of seed on the market.

There were three pots of *Empodium* on display as *E. namaquensis* when the group visited David Victor's garden in October. These were all from the same stock which can be traced back to Harry Hay. The same material has appeared at the Horsham AGS show over the last few years, exhibited by Bob and Rannevig Wallis. One feature of this stock is the very strong scent which is not produced by all *Empodium*. The Encyclopedia provides a key to the species of *Empodium* but it relies on a particular character, leaves appearing before or after the flowers, which is fine in the wild but might not be reproduced in cultivation. However, one immediately notices that the leaves of *E. namaquensis* are broad, 15-60mm wide, whereas the leaves on our plants are less than 10mm wide. A particular and unusual feature of one of the species, *E. flexile*, is that the anthers have "apical appendages". When we examine the anthers of our cultivated *Empodium "namaquensis"* it can be seen that they are quite long and that only the basal part of the anthers produces pollen. I would therefore take the sterile upper half of the anther to be the "appendage". It therefore appears that the plant that many of us are growing is really *E. flexile*. I understand that Mike Salmon* has distributed material of *E. namaquensis* that has broad leaves and might be the real thing.

Our stock of *E. flexile* increases vegetatively and so it can slowly be passed around. However my corms of *E. gloriosum* have stayed solitary over a period of five years. I harvested the subterranean seed but so far after two autumns, it has failed to germinate. Seed of *Empodium* species hardly ever appears on seed lists but one of my friends did obtain seed of *E. veratrifolium* which germinated successfully, although neither he nor I have flowered these yet.

All monocotyledonous plants have their flower parts in threes or sixes; so in the case of *Empodium*, there are six petals and six anthers. However, my *E. gloriosum* stock is completely weird in that all five corms produce flowers that have four petals and four

anthers. Bulb growers often notice that occasionally a plant produces flowers with fewer or extra petals, but this is just an aberration that is not normally seen again. Permanently four-petalled flowers in monocots are extremely rare.

So what are other member's experiences with *Empodiums*?

* Editors note:- Subsequent measurement of '*E. namaquanum*' ex Mike Salmon showed an intermediate leaf width range of 8 to 20 mm. Flowering had finished but the floral structure will be examined next season.

Wants List

Audrey Cain is seeking Corms of *Gladiolus equitans*, *Gladiolus ecklonii*, *Syringodea species* and *Ixia conferta*. If you can assist please contact Audrey direct at Audrey@cain.net

Future issues of the newsletter will contain a wants list as a regular feature, subject to demand – please send details of those elusive plants that you have been seeking to the editor.....other members of the group may be able to assist!