

The Southern African Bulb Group

Newsletter No. 6

Autumn 2006, published October 2006



Committee: Mick Reed (Membership secretary and Newsletter editor), Margaret Corina (Treasurer), Stefan Rau and Terry Smale.

My apologies for being so late sending this issue of the Newsletter but at last it is being sent to you. If you have any difficulty reading this Newsletter, either on the computer screen or printed copy let me know at mick.reed@blueyonder or by telephone to 01293 420975

The paragraph relating to the formation of the group is repeated on page 8 in this issue, but in future this will only be sent to new members. Also the latest updated seed list of Suppliers of Southern African Bulbs will be sent this time but in future only additions and corrections will be sent. I will include this list and the notes on the formation of the group as a welcome to new members.

Editorial

This issue of the newsletter contains a report of the meetings held at Crawley on March 12th and Corfe Mullen on October 1st 2006, an article updating information on *polyxena* by Terry Smale and Audrey Cain's article on Romuleas. The next meeting of the group to be held at Crawley on Sunday March 25th. Speakers etc. to be arranged. Group seed and bulb exchange for members commencing in 2007.

The group welcomes articles, even if only a paragraph or two, and also suggestions for inclusion in future newsletters. Without material from members newsletters would be very sparse indeed. Contributions (by email, or type/ hand written are acceptable!) should be forwarded to the newsletter editor at 52, Purcell Road, Bewbush, Crawley, West Sussex RH11 8XJ (Email mick.reed@blueyonder.co.uk) Publication of the next issue is scheduled for early March 2007.

Crawley Meeting – 12.3.06

The meeting at Crawley was well attended by about twenty members. The hall had space for display tables and sales as well as enough seats for everyone to see the presentations. It was a very friendly and informal day. The display tables were covered with plants, lots to look at and discuss; including a few plants that needed identifying! There were lots of plants to tempt you to open your purse on the sales tables, including some alpinines and hardy plants as well as the South African ones we all wanted. Stefan Rau had brought along some of his library and there were lots of books to look at as well.

Bill Squire opened the proceedings with a slide show of plants that he had seen in his numerous trips to South Africa. This was followed, before lunch, with a little business discussion led by Robin Attrill. After lunch David Victor gave us a digital presentation on Oxalis. He said that I had expressed an interest in Oxalis, but he was sure the group in general were not terribly interested. He then fascinated me with a display of all the different growth forms and showed some beautiful plants. A discussion on cultivation followed and David said that he kept his plants frost-free only; they didn't need much heat at all in the winter.

Rodney Sims and Paul Cumbleton had both brought CDs, and we had fun visiting South Africa with Rodney and also touring Paul's greenhouse. Paul had some lovely Massonias, which I fell in love with. This was followed by a presentation by David and myself, which was really a call for expert help. We showed slides of bulbs found on our visit to South Africa in 2005 and asked for confirmation of those we had (tentatively) identified and names for those we couldn't identify.

The day closed with a plant auction. Terry Smale very kindly brought along three pots of choice bulbs, which he auctioned for the benefit of the Group. We all thanked Pam Reed for her hard work in the kitchen, keeping us supplied with numerous cups of tea and coffee and hot soup at lunchtime.

Margaret Corina

Seed and Bulb Exchange 2007

Commencing next year the Group is going to run a Seed and Bulb exchange. We want to keep it as simple as possible and therefore there are only 3 rules.

Rule 1. If you are going to be a seed donor, send seed to me before 31.7.2007

Rule 2 .If you are going to be a bulb donor, send bulbs to me before 21.8.2007

Rule 3.If you are not going to be a donor but want a seed and bulb list, send a SAE to me before 31.7.2007 (overseas, an IRC)

That's it. Obviously, this is a seed and bulb exchange, so donors always get first choice and very rare items will invariably go to them. However, we will endeavour to always give a fair proportion to non-donors of what they ask for.

This seed and bulb exchange can only be successful if members donate seeds and bulbs to the group. Mick Reed, 52 Purcell Road, Bewbush, Crawley, West Sussex, RH11 8XJ

**Notes on the meeting of the Southern African Bulb Group in Corfe Mullen on 1st
October 2006
By Richard White**

Jonathan Hutchinson (RHS Rosemoor) spoke about the Eastern Cape (Province) including the *Veltheimias*. *V bracteata* comes from the Eastern Cape, whereas the better known *V capensis* comes from the Western Cape.

David Hughes took us on a tour of the Drakensberg mountains on the border of Kwazulu Natal and Lesotho. The orchids in this area are best in January

Alan Horstmann's CD from the 2006 IBSA Symposium was shown.

Terry Smale showed a PowerPoint computer presentation, from which I noted that good areas for bulbs include the Bokkeveld and Roggeveld, inland from the Western Cape coastal desert areas.

He then described his cultural procedures for South African bulbs, which was of especial interest to a novice such as myself.

Pots: Choose the size and depth at which to plant depending on the species. If you are unsure how deep to plant, put them about an inch below the surface, but when re-potting, notice the depth which the bulbs have pulled or grown themselves into, and replant accordingly.

Compost: A well drained neutral to slightly acidic soil, with relatively low nutrient levels (or at least low nitrogen), is preferred by most species. Terry uses a mix with 50% grit: 2 parts grit (4mm granite chippings in his case), 1 part John Innes 2 and 1 part ericaceous compost (as sold for rhododendrons etc.)

Watering: Most SA bulbs come from the winter rainfall area in the west, and can be watered from the end of August until May. Terry said he gives them a good soaking to get them started (at the end of August presumably) and doesn't bother "messing around" with mist sprays. During the winter, watering should be eased off, because the plants cannot grow well with low light levels, and water more in the spring until the leaves die off in May. Then leave them dry. They need warm summer rest, so don't move them into cool shade.

Light and air: They like good ventilation and maximum light, with protection from frost (except for hardy species). Shade may be required in spring, especially in bright April sunshine, to avoid premature loss of foliage, which may affect bulb size later. A cold frame during spring may be better than a greenhouse for some species, because it will be cooler at this time. They especially dislike poor light and rich soil, which causes over-lush growth. Artificial light may be beneficial if one is feeling experimental (and rich!)

Temperature: They can go down to around +3, so little or no heating should be required. Cold frames can be used for many species, with fleece used during frosty periods. It may be worth experimenting with some species out of doors, provided they have a well drained spot that is dry in summer.

Pests: Mealy bugs and aphids are the worst pests (if slugs and snails are excluded!) and can be controlled with Imidacloprid (Provado). Terry drenches the soil with this. If material is infected by viruses, destroy it. Remove dead flowers in autumn and winter to reduce the chance of Botrytis attack, which is especially risky with those species with short stemmed flowers close to the bulb.

Growing from seed: Most seeds need a rest period before germination, although a few will germinate straight away. Sow in early September in a cool place such as a shaded cold frame. Just cover the seeds with grit. A fall in temperature at this time of year encourages germination (as well as initiating bulb growth). Germination should occur in four to six weeks. Bring them into frost free conditions with more light when they germinate. Bring the growth on later (presumably in spring?) with a low nitrogen fertiliser. Terry mentioned Phostrogen, but isn't Miracle Grow or a tomato feed likely to have lower N? (Read the packet!)**

Terry gets some of his seeds from Silverhill Seeds (<http://www.silverhillseeds.co.za/>) but they provide no habitat data. Another source is Gordon Summerfield, PO Box 5150, Helderberg, Somerset West 7135 South Africa; tel ++27-21-855-2442 email:summerfields@xsinet.co.za

Other sources are listed at <http://www.sheildsgardens.com/bulbsources.html>

Further cultivation notes can be found in SABG Newsletter Number 5. (copies are available on request)

** Editors Note: Chempak No. 4 is a High Potash Feed (Powder) which is 15:15: 30, there is also a liquid which is 0:10:10 both of these to be added to your watering can. Many other combinations of Nitrogen, Phosphates and Potash, many with added trace elements, are available.

Books featuring Southern African Bulbous Plants.

Gladiolus in Southern Africa, by Peter Goldblatt and John Manning, watercolours by Fay Anderson and Auriol Batten.
ISBN 1 874950 32 6. Highly recommended

The Color Encyclopedia of Cape Bulbs, By John Manning, Peter Goldblatt and Dee Snijman
ISBN 0-88192-547-0

The Moraeas of Southern Africa, by Peter Goldblatt, watercolours by Fay Anderson
ISBN 0 620 09974 7 Highly recommended

Bulbs (Revised Edition) by John E Bryan, includes many bulbs from Southern Africa

Yet More about *Polyxena*

by Terry Smale

My last ramblings about the genus *Polyxena* were in Newsletter number 3 of the Southern African Bulb Group. What I have not previously mentioned is the origin of this generic name which is based on the name of a lady, known as Polly to her friends, from the classical Greek period. Polyxena was the daughter of King Priam of Troy, who reigned over the city at the time it was conquered by the Mycenaeans using their equine dirty trick. Achilles, however, was killed in the battle as a result of his dodgy heel and Polly was sacrificed at his tomb. Now, what the connection between that story and pretty autumn-flowering bulbs is, I do not know. Incidentally, when talking about this genus, I use the common pronunciation of X as Z (xenon, xerophyte, etc.) and so it becomes “polyzena”.

I indicated in the last notes that I had failed to germinate seed of *Polyxena brevifolia*. I rectified this by purchasing six little seedling bulbs from Gordon Summerfield in January, 2004. These hatched out OK in the autumn of that year and I had one flower spike in 2005, with all of them flowering this autumn. I was able to display the pot at the Group’s meeting in Dorset and also at the AGS show in Horsham, where it gained a first prize (in a class with one entry!). It was initially described in 1812 by Ker-Gawler in Curtis’s Botanical Magazine as *Scilla brevifolia*, but has largely been lost as a supposed synonym of *P. corymbosa*. Now that it has flowered for me, I can see how different it is. First, *P. brevifolia* flowers more than a month earlier than *P. corymbosa* and is the earliest polyxena by far, even beating *P. longituba*. The first flowers were out by late September and are spaced along the stem in the form of a raceme, nothing like the flat-topped corymb of *P. corymbosa*. They are pale mauve with a darker mid-stripe and tend not to open flat, thus presenting a more tubular form than observed for *P. corymbosa*. I don’t think that I have managed to set any seed on my plants and it remains to be seen whether they offset as prolifically as the related *P. paucifolia* and *P. corymbosa*.

The distinctiveness of *P. brevifolia* was recognised by Alison van der Merwe (= Alison Summerfield) during the course of her Ph.D. research and confirmed by DNA sequence data. *P. corymbosa* was originally collected from Lion’s Head, overlooking Cape Town and the only known populations are confined to the Cape Peninsula. *P. brevifolia* appears to be more widely spread and is reported from the Gordon’s Bay area on the south coast up to Clanwilliam in the north. However, considering the scarcity of *P. brevifolia* in cultivation, I wonder how much remains in the wild and the only material presently available to growers, hails from Gordon’s Bay.

I am now growing three accessions of *P. pygmaea* and they seem to be very uniform in their long-tubed mauve flowers with strongly recurved (circinate) petals. Two of them have documentation, namely Lavranos 31250 from Groenkloof in the Kamiesberg and Gordon Summerfield’s offering from Rooiberg near Kamieskroon. The third pot came to me,

without any identification, from the collection of the late Bryan Makin. There is a big variation in how compact the plants are. The best by far is the Groenkloof material which has greyish-green leaves flat on the soil and flowers that are almost stemless. The Rooiberg plants have greener, more-upright leaves and the flowers develop on quite long peduncles. The Makin material is more or less in-between the other two in its form. Unfortunately, I only have one flowering-size bulb of the Groenkloof material plus one seedling achieved by self pollination. Offsets are rarely produced by this species; therefore bulking it up will take time. If you try to source the Groenkloof material, please note that Lavranos 31250 seems to be a mixed collection with a rather fine form of *Lachenalia carnosa*.

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, Gallon, Reigate, Surrey, RH2 OTA)
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.glad@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 - Catalogue online at <http://www.smale1.demon.co.uk/index.htm>
- **Springbank Nurseries** (Springbank Nursery, Winford Rd, Newchurch, Sandown, Isle of Wight, PO360JX)
A considerable range of hybrids, and a few species, are listed in the catalogue.

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 after all, but the nursery is suspending sales during the mid winter months. The focus of the listings will, in future, place more emphasis on Western Cape taxa). The most recent catalogue was circulated in December 2005.
- **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). Catalogue is available via Email as a Word attachment. The Email address is summerfields@xsinet.co.za
- **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)

USA suppliers

- **Telos Rare Bulbs** (P. O. Box 4147, Arcata, CA 95518, USA)

This US based nursery has recently advertised that it is resuming overseas shipments. The catalogue, which contains an extensive range of Oxalis, is on the web at <http://www.telosrarebulbs.com/index.html>

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.

ROMULEA KOMSBERGENSIS, DIVERSIFORMIS & THEIR NATURAL HYBRIDS

In spring 1996 the first corm to flower in a batch of wild collected seed of *Romulea diversiformis* from IBSA, produced this amazing F1 flower.



F1



R diversiformis



R komsbergensis

A photograph sent to IBSA came back with the suggestion that it is probably a natural hybrid of *R. komsbergensis* and *R. diversiformis* since they both grow in the same area.

At the request of IBSA it was self pollinated, and the resulting seeds produced these four interesting variations in 2000. (F2a has since died.)



F2a



F2b



F2c



F2d

In 2004 the open pollinated seed of the F1, collected in 2002, produced the flower below.



Open pollinated seed from the F2 plants in the intervening years has not yet flowered. After the 2006 IBSA Symposium, Alan Horstmann pointed out the exact place on the Komsberg Pass where the original R diversiformis seed was collected! I did not spot any obvious hybrids, but the flowers were closing for the day, and we had a long journey ahead.

A few members had seed of F1, F2b, F2c, and F2d at our October meeting, so it will be interesting to see how they eventually turn out.

BALANCE SHEET as at 31st October 2006				
Date				
1.5.05	Balance	555.27		

INCOME			EXPENDITURE	
12.3.06	Donations Crawley Meeting	78.89	Hall rent at Crawley	50.00
30.4.06	Membership Fees	70.00	Admin (postage etc.)	34.02
1.10.06	Donations Corfe Mullen Meeting	243.95	Corfe Mullen Mtg.	40.00
1.10.06			Speakers expenses	50.00
	Total	392.84	Total	174.02
	Balance at Bank	774.09		

The meeting arranged for Sunday 25th March at Crawley will be held in Crawley Horticultural Society's Hall in Ifield Avenue, Crawley. (The same as last year) Maps will be included in the Newsletter sent out in early March. The meeting will be from 10.30 – 4.00p.m. with plant sales and talks by members. Tea, coffee and soup will be available during the day.

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.

Since the last Newsletter the weather in the U.K. has once again been very unpredictable. The spring was virtually non-existent and then we were suddenly into Summer. July was extremely hot and in several southern areas of England there was a continued hose-pipe ban for all gardeners. August was still dry but cooler and then we had a nice September without any frosts at all. October has been extremely wet and very warm for the time of year, no frosts, and we still have the hose-pipe ban. Seeds sown in September and October haven't had cold nights and seem to need the cold before germinating. Southern African bulbs have rapidly grown since re-potting in August and Polyxenas are in flower now. I find that light levels in my conservatory are probably too low and cause many of the plants to grow taller than they would in the wild. Have any of you in the U.K. installed extra lighting to combat this? If so we would like to hear from you.

Until the next newsletter in the New Year, we wish all members a very happy and prosperous time in your gardens

Mick Reed