

## A visit to the Cape

In the first week of October 2012, I had the opportunity to visit South Africa. I went to Swellendam, some 250 km from Cape Town, where I strolled through the Fynbos. And, on my way back to Belgium by way of Cape Town, I, of course, spent a wonderful afternoon in Kirstenbosch Botanic Garden.

The flora of the Cape Region is of an almost unnatural beauty. It is also quite unique and very rich in species endemic to this part of the world. October is the beginning of spring and the temperatures are moderate. Most of the annuals are flowering, as are a lot of bulbs and quite a number of shrubs. It is, therefore, the best period of the year to enjoy this part of the world. A lot of flowers there are unknown to our gardens. Of course I am familiar with *Agapanthus* (not in flower when I was there) and *Kniphofia*, to name just a few, but others were new to me, even on the genus level. I wonder if, or should I say when, we will see more of them outside botanic collections. In the meantime, here are a few bulbs and perennials I dream about...

*Albuca canadensis* (= *A. maxima*) is a bulbous perennial that reaches as much as 1.5 m in height. The flowers are arranged in racemes of weakly nodding, white flowers with broad green bands. The leaves are fleshy, channeled and clasp the base of the stems. From Namaqualand to the southern Cape. I found this beautiful plant several times on the stony soils around Swellendam and in Little Karoo.



*Dietes bicolor* is a kind of "wild Iris" I saw this plant in several private and public gardens as it is a very important landscape plant in South Africa. This species is endemic to sub-Saharan Africa. The same is true for *D. grandiflora*. In *D. bicolor* the flowers, flat as they are, are white with purpleblack markings. In *D. grandiflora* the form of the flower is more reminiscent to that of *I. japonica* and the markings on the white petals are golden yellow.



*Crinum macowanii* is a spectacular species with large flowers. I saw this in Kirstenbosch Botanic Garden. It is found from the eastern Cape to Limpopo, Botswana and Namibia. The flowers are white with pink stripes. The leaves are fleshy and have undulate margins. Plants need a spot in full sun and like moist places. They are susceptible to attack by lily borer caterpillars.



*ELEGIA capensis* is one of the so called Cape restio's. It is a typical Fynbos species, belonging to the Restionaceae. In Europe the stems are frequently used in flower arrangement, for structural works. This one reaches to 2 meters and has stiffly erect stems bearing dens whorls of sterile branchlets. The vernacular name of Fonteingras very well illustrates the overall impression this plant gives.

*Lachenalia unicolor* is one of the more than 120 species of this genus . Its vernacular name, Unicolor Cape Cowslip, indicates that this one is from the Cape region. Others can be found in Namibia and in other parts of South Africa. They are bubs that need an absolutely dry resting period. The colors are beautiful, this one a perfect purplish pink with darker tips.



*Leonotis leonurus* is a perennial or subshrub to 2 m that, when in flower, is reminiscent of a kind of Phlomis, but a fiery orange one. I saw this several times in Swellendam and other places I visited. It is rather common along roadsides and in rough grasslands from the southwestern Cape to Gauteng. The flowers are pollinated by sunbirds.



*Merwillia plumbea* is probably the most imposing bulb I saw during my visit to Kirstenbosch. It is to be found in northern Eastern Cape and Free State to Mpumalanga. The blooms are light to deep blue or occasionally white.

They need full sun and can be more or less evergreen in the greenhouse.



*Strelitzia reginae* 'Mandela's Gold' is a marvelous form with a striking color combination of light yellow and deep blue. Named for Nelson Mandela when he visited Kirstenbosch in 1996. The form was selected at the garden after nearly twenty years of selection. It can be found in the trade in Europe.

*Veltheimia bracteata* is a bulb form the Hyacinthaceae family, found from Baviaanskloof mountains to Mazeppa Bay. It is not hardy (to 5 °C), but otherwise easily cultivated and long-lived. For full sun to light shade.



Literature: 'Grow Bulbs', by Graham Duncan, Kirstenbosch Gardening Series, ISBN 978-1-919684-56-7

Field Guide to Fynbos, by John Manning, ISBN 978-1-77007-265-7

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