



Southern African Bulb Group

www.sabg.tk

SABG Newsletter no. 42 August 2020

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News

- ★ The 2020 Bulb and Seed Exchange is under way, and Jon Evans is about to send out the bulbs and seeds requested by members.
- ★ The SABG is adopting a formal Constitution, the draft of which appears later in this newsletter.

Dates for your diary

- ★ Unfortunately here is a date to **remove** from your diary: the Committee has decided, with regret, to cancel the SABG Autumn Meeting which had been scheduled for Sunday 11th October 2020.
- ★ We have not yet made a decision on holding the Spring 2021 meeting, and a date has not been set.
- ★ We are all looking forward to the day when we can resume normal activities, more or less, and ...
- ★ ... then this column will return to normal too.

From the Editor

You can see from the headline at the top of the page that this is Newsletter number 42. Devotees of Douglas Adams and *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* will no doubt recall that "42" is the answer to the question about the ultimate nature of Life, The Universe and Everything. Here, our aims are more modest, just to keep ourselves sane, interested and occupied during these strange times. I can't resist the temptation to claim that 42 is the number of spikes on a coronavirus.

Our twice-yearly meetings have been suspended for the time being, as have many similar activities including most horticultural club and society meetings around the world. Travel to see plants in the wild has also been curtailed. I notice that an organised trip to see the "Glorious wildflowers of South Africa" with the BBC Gardeners' World presenter Nick Bailey, would have been taking place at this very moment, but has presumably been cancelled.

We must remember that the majority of our members do not attend our meetings anyway, because they live too far away. Before the coronavirus arrived, the SABG Committee has decided to try to encourage and support meetings in other parts of the UK (or even elsewhere), if there were members in those areas who might like to help organise them. These ideas must unfortunately be put on hold for a while, but while you are pining wistfully for a return to “normal”, do have a think about whether we can actually do things better than before.

Meanwhile we must carry on communicating in other ways, so that all members can benefit. Do let me know of any observations, ideas, requests or other items that may be of interest to members, and I will include them in the Newsletter or on the web site or both, as appropriate. Thank you especially to three members who have done just that in the last few days; their observations on growing South African bulbs under artificial lights and in Spain and Portugal have had to be held over until the next newsletter for space reasons.

I mentioned in the last Newsletter that I had some items left over. The reason for that was partly the urgent need then to warn members of the cancellation of the Spring SABG meeting, and also to prevent that newsletter from becoming too large, which might cause problems in sending by email or might increase postal charges.

Two of the items now in this newsletter are the new SABG Constitution and a nice article about Empodiums. Other items in this Newsletter include a request for identifying a *Tulbaghia*. and some notes on Eriospermums and on South African bulbs which can survive our UK winters outdoors.

Keep safe and keep growing!

Notices and Requests

SABG Bulb and Seed Exchange 2020

The 2020 Bulb and Seed Exchange is under way, and Jon Evans is about to send out the bulbs and seeds requested, so if you still want to make a request, please contact him straight away. If you have email, you will have received details, which are also at <https://sabg.tk/exchange:start>. (If you received this newsletter by post, I enclose Jon’s list, but you will need to respond immediately if you want to request any material.)

Unidentified Tulbaghia

I was involved in clearing the bulbs of a Midland AGS member who had left his bulbs to Birmingham Botanic

Gardens. Among them were some that were un-named. These I kept to see what they were before getting them to the Gardens.

Two of these have now flowered. One I have traced to be *Tulbaghia natalensis*. The other does not seem to fit any other species, but is possibly *T. cominsii*. Can you or another member let me know what it is. There seems to be no monograph on *Tulbaghia*.

Ian Nex



SABG meetings

The next SABG meeting

As mentioned above, the SABG Committee has not yet decided whether it will be safe to hold a meeting in Spring 2021. We appreciate that many members will be keen to resume our meetings, but equally members will be concerned if there is any significant risk, especially to members who may be more vulnerable than others.

SABG Constitution

The Committee has drafted a Constitution for the Group, to act as a statement of our aims and objectives and the procedures we will follow. This will not in itself change what we do and how we do it, but may help to explain our activities to members and to outside organisations that we deal with. We are indebted to our Treasurer Rodney Sims for doing most of the hard work on this.

The Constitution is appended to the end of this Newsletter. Formally, it has to be agreed by the members of the SABG. If you have any comments, please respond to me or any other member of the Committee within one month, that is by 1st October. Members who do not reply will be treated as approving. After that date the Constitution will be adopted, or revised and reissued if necessary.

Empodium species cultivated in the UK

After the Alpine Garden Society autumn shows in 2019, I was included in an extended discussion between a few AGS and SABG members, instigated by Ray Drew for the Joint Rock Garden Committee, about the identity of the species of *Empodium* grown in pots in the UK. The discussion centred on plants exhibited variously as *E. flexile*, *E. namaquensis*, and *Curculigo namaquensis*. Later on, the plants grown as *E. plicatum* were included in the discussion. *E. veratrifolium* is grown by a few enthusiasts in the UK, but it was excluded from the discussion as being clearly distinct (it is much more tender, and tends to multiply fast producing lots of leaf and a few flowers in February). Much of the material grown as *E. flexile* and *E. plicatum* derives from Harry Hay originally, though Bill Squire used to have a pot of material of *E. plicatum* from South Africa.

From discussion, it was rapidly agreed that plants grown as *E. flexile*, *E. namaquensis*, and *Curculigo namaquensis* were almost certainly the same species, which for now I will designate *E. flexile*. The primary reason for this identification was physical similarity, including the presence of sterile appendages on the anthers of all three.



Bob and Rannveig Wallis' *Empodium flexile* – with a sterile apical appendage circled and the normal pollen-producing part of the anther arrowed

Then Ray noticed that our material of *E. plicatum* also had sterile appendages, though we all felt that the two plants were significantly different. and plausibly separate species.



Jon Evans' plant of *E. plicatum*, again with sterile apical appendage clearly seen.

The characteristics of these two clones were tabulated by Bob Wallis (on the next page).

The best authority I can find for this genus is “The Color Encyclopedia of Cape Bulbs” by Manning, Goldblatt and Snijman. For more information, this gives the reference Hilliard O.M. and B.L. Burtt (1973) “Notes on some plants of Southern Africa chiefly from Natal: III” in “Notes from the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh” 32: 303-387, but I haven’t managed to access a copy of this.



E. flexile (left) and *E. plicatum* (right) compared by Bob Wallis.

	<i>E "flexile"</i>	<i>E "plicatum"</i>	comment
Leaves			
largest (outer leaf) (~ 4 weeks after anthesis)	13 x 250mm	4 x 150mm	Paul Cumbleton reports leaves up to 400mm on <i>E. "flexile"</i> plants growing in sand bed.
surface	Hispid (rough to touch) Markedly pleated	Smooth Markedly pleated	
Flowers			
Outer tepal	7.4 x 31mm	3.5 x 18mm	
Scent	Highly fragrant - fruity	Low – zero scent	Some growers report strong fragrance from <i>E. plicatum</i>
Stamens	Markedly papillose Long extension at tip of anthers	Slightly papillose Long extension at tip of anthers	
Timing in UK cold greenhouse	Early October	Mid to late September	
Habit	Bulbs divide within old tunic	Markedly rhizomatous	

The descriptions of the two relevant species from Manning, Goldblatt and Snijman are as follows. Neither seems a particularly good match for the material we grow, and certainly they don't capture the main differences we see between the two species (*E. plicatum* with much smaller leaves and flowers).

Empodium flexile (Nel) M. F. Thompson ex Snijman
Plants c. 10 cm high. Leaves three, usually dry at flowering, narrowly lanceolate, c. 5 mm wide, softly pleated with ciliate ribs, basal sheaths papery or fibrous. Flowers yellow, scented, tepals 15-30 x 3-5 mm, recurved from a neck 1- 3 cm long, stamens spreading, bearing short to long, usually orange apical appendages, ovary subterranean to shortly exserted. Fruit semisucculent. Flowering February-June. Clay or sand on stony flats, RV, NW, KM (Namaqualand to Oudtshoorn).

Empodium plicatum (Thunberg) Garside

Plants 10-30cm high, solitary or clumped. Leaves one to four, lanceolate, dry or emerging at flowering, initially shorter than the inflorescence but c. 30cm long and 5-10mm wide when mature, with deeply pleated blades and hispid ribs, basal sheaths pale and membranous. Flowers yellow, rarely scented, tepals 13-30 x 3-5mm, outspread from a somewhat hispid neck 5-10cm long, stamens suberect, ovary subterranean. Fruit exserted from the ground less than 3cm. Flowering April-June. Clay and loamy flats or lower slopes, in seasonally damp sites. RV, NW, SW, AP (Namaqualand, Bokkeveld and Roggeveld Escarpments to Cape Peninsula and Breede River mouth).

Manning, Goldblatt and Snijman give the following key for the genus *Empodium*:

- 1 Flowers with the neck above the ovary exceeding 2cm long; anthers sub-erect => 2
- 1' Flowers with the neck above the ovary shorter than 2cm long; anthers spreading, often curved outward => 3
- 2 Flowers coinciding with the leaves; leaves longer than the inflorescence; neck above the ovary smooth => *E. gloriosum*
- 2' Flowers appearing in advance of the leaves or if coinciding then the leaves shorter than the inflorescence; neck above the ovary hispid => *E. plicatum*
- 3 Flowers appearing in advance of the leaves or if coinciding then the leaves shorter than the inflorescence; anthers bearing sterile appendages => *E. flexile*
- 3' Flowers coinciding with the leaves; the leaves usually longer than the inflorescence; anthers without sterile appendages => 4
- 4 Leaves lanceolate, 10-20mm wide, the basal sheaths dark brown for their entire length; flowers carried 10cm or more above the ground => *E. veratrifolium*
- 4' Leaves ovate-lanceolate, 15-60mm wide, the basal sheaths pale with dark brown tips; flowers carried less than 5cm above the ground => *E. namaquensis*

Both clones grown in the UK have prominent sterile appendages on the anthers, which would appear to eliminate identification as *E. veratrifolium* or *E. namaquensis* (3'). Whilst the key doesn't say explicitly that *E. plicatum* does not have such an appendage, the description of the genus in the encyclopedia says "An interesting feature of *E. flexile* and the summer-flowering *E. monophyllum* of eastern southern Africa is the presence of stout appendages on the tips of the anthers" which would at least suggest that these are not present in the other species such as *E. plicatum*.

Whilst the identity of plants shown in photos on the internet must always be treated with a good deal of scepticism, searching for *E. plicatum* does yield several good photos of the plant in the wild, displaying pollen-bearing anthers with no appendage, and long slender necks to the flowers, unlike those we see in our plants.

We might reasonably conclude from this that the plants we grow as *E. plicatum* are in fact a smaller cultivar of *E. flexile*. In fact, these plants key out as such, and are a good match for the description given for *E. flexile*.

The question then becomes, what of the material we grow as *E. flexile*? Using the information given in Manning, Goldblatt and Snijman, the best identification for that is also *E. flexile*, though the plants we grow seem larger than typical from the description, and have longer necks to the flowers (that may be due to light levels here in October).

For now, it would seem that the best thing to do is to keep our current labels, and hope that one of the South African botanists will take another look at this genus.

Paul Cumbleton sent this information to Graham Duncan at Kirstenbosch, but Graham is not very familiar with the genus.

Jon Evans

Bulbils

I've dug up three more "Bulbils" for this Newsletter, all propagated from articles in newspapers and magazines.

Freesia: true or false?

The Gardening section of the *Daily Telegraph*¹ on Saturday 25th July 2020² had a page by Matt Collins, head gardener at the Garden Museum in London. Two years ago, he and an assistant dug over a bed at the Museum (sounds more like a Garden than a Museum!) The following year, some surprise plants appeared, which had presumably been lying dormant or at least hidden.

Two of these were quickly identified, but more puzzling was "a delicate crimson flower, 30cm tall, with clear

family ties – in stem and straplike leaf – to the iris family." Despite asking a number of people, he was unable to identify it.

It might be hardy enough to grow outside in a sheltered place, because Matt reported that it came up again this year, having obviously survived more than one winter, and he was able to identify it as *Freesia laxa*, which he called "false freesia", from eastern South Africa. It is grown in the Rock Garden at Kew, and gritty low-nutrient soil should help it to survive. You probably remember that Paul Cumbleton carried out an extensive survey of hardiness a couple of years ago; the summary article in Newsletter 39³ doesn't mention it, but in the full list of results⁴ *F. laxa* is listed as surviving outside as low as -6 or -7C, or even -15C below a west-facing wall.

Some of you may have grown this plant, but I wondered why it had acquired the name "false freesia". Perhaps it was because it was formerly known as *Anomatheca laxa*, and thus considered not to be a "true" *Freesia*. It has also visited the genus *Lapeirousia*. Another name is apparently "flowering grass", which doesn't sound very helpful!

The flowers are crimson with dark red spots on the lower three petals. There is also a named variety called "Joan Evans", with white petals with smaller red spots, which for some reason reminds me of one of our Committee!



Freesia laxa, Richard White, 25 April 2008

I believe the plant in my photograph here is *F. laxa*; I know I had a plant with the label "Freesia laxa", but this photo was taken in 2008, in the days when I used to write the names of plants I photographed on a piece of paper. Hopefully the paper will turn up one day (it will either be in my filing cabinet or in a pile of papers

1 I only read the Telegraph for the gardening bits and the Matt cartoon, you understand.
2 If you subscribe to the Daily Telegraph you should be able to read the whole story here: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/gardening/problem-solving/unearthing-horticultural-history-border-overhaul-can-reveal/> (and if you don't have a subscription, ask your web browser to show the page source and you can see all the text among the formatting codes!)

3 <https://sabg.tk/media/newsletter:sabgnews39.pdf>

4 <https://sabg.tk/topics:hardy:start>

waiting to be filed!), so that I can tag the photo and many others appropriately. Nowadays, I try to remember to photograph the label at the same time as the plant, so it is easy to label the photo later. Perhaps this is the real meaning of the heading above this story!

The South African Meadow, again

As those of you who are members of the RHS will probably already have noticed, an article in the July 2020 edition of the RHS magazine *The Garden* continues the theme of South African bulbs which are hardy in the UK, at least in the south. Written by Peter Jones, the garden manager at RHS Wisley, it describes and illustrates this large area at the garden, which I have mentioned in previous newsletters. The photographs in the article show a much greater density of flowers than I have seen on my visits, perhaps due to my bad timing, or perhaps the plants are establishing themselves more. The article does not say when the photos were taken, but the implication is that it was mid summer, with red-hot poker, *Agapanthus*, *Eucomis* and *Berkheya* daisies in evidence.

The bulbs mentioned and illustrated include *Gladiolus dalenii*, *Galtonia candicans*, *Eucomis comosa* and a hybrid, *Watsonia confusa*, *W. pillansii* and a hybrid, an *Agapanthus* cultivar and *Tritonia disticha*. Several other daisies, a *Delosperma* and a grass are also illustrated. The SABG is even credited as a source of further information!

Eriospermums

An article in the BCSS (British Cactus and Succulent Society) journal *CactusWorld* was written by SABG member Terry Smale, who is also a leading light in the cactus world. Its subject is the South African genus *Eriospermum* which, having tubers, can be regarded by us in the SABG as an honorary bulb and by those in the BCSS as a caudiciform succulent.

The genus has wandered through several families, but is currently housed in the asparagus family Asparagaceae. If this family sounds unfamiliar, it now contains a number of subfamilies whose genera were originally included in the Liliaceae, later separated into several smaller families, and recently grouped together in the asparagus family. *Lachenalia*, for example, has ended up here after travelling for a while in the Hyacinthaceae.

Of greater interest to most people is that the leaves of some *Eriospermums* have what botanists call “enations” – strangely shaped outgrowths, sometimes looking like miniature Christmas trees or tiny clumps of mesembs sprouting out of the middle of the leaf.

Terry’s article describes several species and their cultivation. There was a revision published in 1994 by Pauline Perry, whose brief obituary appeared in Newsletter 32⁵, albeit without mentioning her work on *Eriospermum*.

In the next Newsletter

I plan to produce the next Newsletter (no. 43) for distribution during the autumn. Do let me know of anything you would like to be included. Anything of potential interest to other members, from simple observations and cultural hints, with or without photos, to horticultural, ecological or scientific investigations, or anything in between, will be most welcome.

Lachenalia bachmannii & *L. viridiflora*

Meanwhile, David Lloyd sent me some photos, which he described as “pics of material that I managed to grow from the Bulb Exchange two years ago ... I was particularly pleased to have got the *Lachenalia bachmannii* to flower, also the *Lachenalia viridiflora* – especially as I grew them on a South-facing windowsill under LED lights in the winter.”

More from David in the next Newsletter.



Lachenalia bachmannii, David Lloyd



Lachenalia bachmannii, David Lloyd



Lachenalia viridiflora, David Lloyd

SABG Committee

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Southern African Bulb Group

Constitution

Aims

The SABG was set up to promote the cultivation, study and conservation of bulbous plants from southern Africa.

Membership

Membership is open to anyone with an interest in these plants by application form with a joining donation. The amount of the donation required is stated on the application form, and may be varied from time to time, at the discretion of the committee. Membership of the group shall entitle the member to participate in all general activities of the group.

Members may resign by letter to the Secretary. A member may be asked to resign, or be expelled from the group, at the discretion of the Committee.

Committee and Officers

The group is organised by a Committee derived from members.

The Committee consists of a Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer with up to three other members, all prepared to manage the group. In the event of there being too many volunteers, an election will be held by email voting of all members. The Committee may co-opt up to two extra members if they think fit.

A list of members with their contact details will be maintained by one designated person, and made available to those Committee members who need it. This list will not be available to any other individual or organisation.

Members have the choice of limiting the use of their details.

Meetings

The aim is to have a number of planned meetings a year (usually two) which any member may attend. Meetings are also open to members' guests and non-members on payment of the meeting charge.

Committee meetings will be scheduled to take place at the same place and date as the planned meetings, before, after or in the lunch break of the meetings.

There will be no Annual General Meeting. Any member may call for a special meeting by letter, supported and signed by five other members, to the Secretary; this will be arranged by the Committee to happen together at the next planned meeting.

Notice of a special meeting, giving details of any matters to be discussed, will be communicated to the membership at least one month before that meeting. The quorum for a special meeting is 25, or half the membership, whichever is less. Minutes will be taken by the Secretary of any special meeting, and distributed to the membership.

Other Activities

Members will be invited to participate by mail and email in bulb and seed exchanges, provided volunteers or Committee members are available to organise these. Donations are expected to cover the cost of packing and postage.

From time to time, garden or other visits may be arranged, in accordance with the aims of the group. A charge may be made for these to cover costs.

Procedures

The Chairman, or other officer in his absence, will conduct the planned meetings.

At any meeting the Chairman or his stand-in will have a casting vote if required.

All communications between the Committee and the other members will as far as possible be by email. Any member not having access to the Internet can receive communications by post on provision of stamped and addressed C5 envelopes to the Secretary.

Finances

There is no yearly membership fee, but the Committee may request a levy if finances make it necessary.

The group will open a cheque account with the National Westminster Bank. Cheques must be signed by any two of the three officers.

The Treasurer will maintain accounts of income and expenditure. The accounts will be audited by an independent person and after approval be published to all members by email or newsletter.

Payment of a meeting fee is made to cover the cost of hall hire and speaker expenses. Members are encouraged to offer plants or relevant books for sale at meetings. Sales are subject to a levy of 20% for group funds.

Surplus funds may be disbursed as grants to further the aims of the group, at the discretion of the Committee.

Changes to the Constitution

Revisions to the constitution will be framed by the Committee and presented to a special meeting for ratification. If accepted by majority vote of the special meeting, the Committee will notify members and any other interested parties of the changes made.

Dissolution

In the event of any decision to close the group, the whole membership will be notified within a month. If not revoked during the following twelve months from that notification, the group assets will be donated to a plant charity.