

# **The Southern African Bulb Group**

Newsletter No. 7

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

If you have any difficulty reading this Newsletter, either on the computer screen or printed copy let me know at email: [mick.reed@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:mick.reed@blueyonder.co.uk) or by telephone to 01293 420975

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](mailto:mick.reed@blueyonder.co.uk) ) Publication of the next issue is scheduled for mid September 2007.

**Meeting on Sunday 25 March 2007**

**at**

**Crawley Horticultural Society Hall**

**The hall will be open from 10.30 am to 4.00 pm**

**Speakers:**

**David Victor: Report of the 2006 IBSA Symposium and Field Trip**

**Terry Smale: Seed Production**



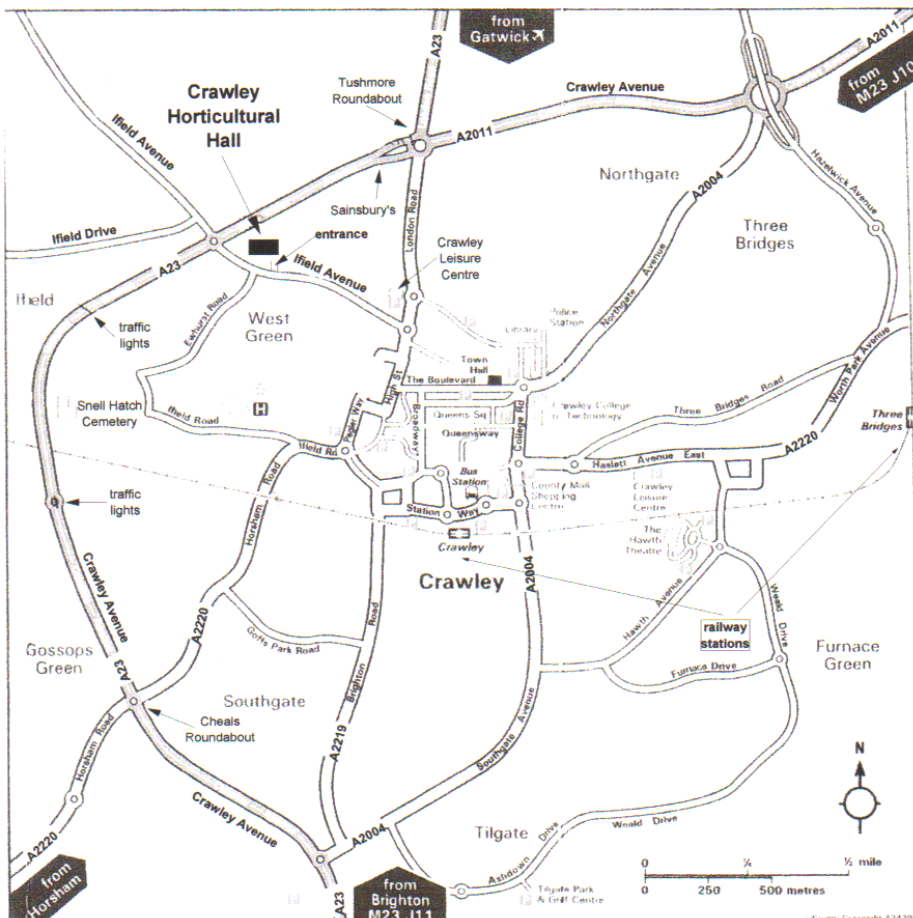
There is adequate parking and the hall is fairly large. We hope that as many members as possible will make the effort to attend. The rent for the hall has come from Group funds and there will be no charge to the members attending. There is no charge for a sales table but donations to Group funds would be appreciated. The hall has a kitchen, and tea and coffee will be available. I would suggest packed lunches unless anybody wants to venture into Crawley to find an eatery. The nearby Crawley Leisure Centre has many fast food outlets and restaurants should they be required.

David Corina has volunteered to be Plant Sales Manager. All plants for sale must be double-labeled. This means that hopefully not everyone will be tied to the sales table and will have more time.

There will be some spare time available during the afternoon, so please bring along some pictures, plants or books, to share. Remember if you want something named this is probably your best chance! There will be both slide and digital projectors available so either format is acceptable.

Would you please notify Mick Reed if you are attending

Email address is:  
mick.reed@blueyonder.co.uk or  
phone 01293 420975



## Seed and Bulb Exchange 2007

Commencing this 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**

### A cape bulb collection in Lancashire by Darren Sleep

Mick suggested I write this as there are few SABG members in the northern half of the country and it was felt that my experiences might be useful.

My interest in the cape flora began after a visit to South Africa in 1999. I bought a few packets of seed whilst there (at the Karroo botanic garden shop and elsewhere). *Gladiolus gracilis* and *Wachendorfia paniculata* are still with me. Others were mostly non-bulbous plants. Since this time I have had material from numerous sources – including most of the suppliers listed in the SABG bulletin.

In 1999 we were living on Walney Island (part of Barrow-in-Furness) where we enjoyed the effects of being near the west coast to the full. Lots of sunshine and almost no frost. In 2003 we moved further inland and higher up and have lost a little of this advantage although the coast is only a mile away. Rainfall (and, worse, cloud cover) are higher than I would guess those in the south contend with, though I suspect temperatures are no more severe, except possibly compared with South West England. Temperatures of less than -5°C are very unusual. Rainfall is over 1000mm but is much higher still a little further inland. The garden is dry thanks to being on a sunny south-west slope on limestone. Some Cape bulbs do OK outside and unprotected – *Polyxena longituba* for example.

My main collection of cape bulbs is housed, along with some hardy bulbs, succulents, proteas, ericas and alpines (!) in a 6 x 2.5m greenhouse. This is essentially managed as an alpine house, with all vents and doors at both ends open throughout the year except when frost and gales are forecast. A fan is run when the greenhouse is closed, with a heater circuit set to come on if the temperature drops below 1°C. Many members would prefer a higher minimum temperature but my aim is to keep growth as slow as possible whilst light levels are poor, the only frost damage I have seen is where leaves have been in direct contact with a clay pot (evaporation can cool the porous surface of the pot well below ambient air temperature – be careful if growing tender prostrate leaved species in clay pots!). Nowadays I use almost entirely plastic pots for my bulbs in any case, but there are one or two species which prefer plunged clays. And some species look more attractive in clay half pots or pans (massonia spring to mind). Even given maximum light some species of *Massonia* and *Polyxena*

refuse to stay in character and the normally prostrate leaves get drawn up, with the inflorescence squeezed between them. The best I can hope for is a sunny autumn when these species behave better. Other species in these genera have absolutely prostrate leaves no matter how poor the light. I will not use artificial light.

My cultivation techniques and annual cycle follow the methods published previously by Terry Smale. I have found one or two modifications are helpful here. The biggest help has been a much reduced incidence of stem/collar/neck rots in winter since adopting a system of standing my pots in shallow trays and watering only from beneath once the pots have had a couple of good soakings from above in early autumn. Some species are still prone to rots and need care (*Moraea aristata* & *villosa* especially), I suspect these would be happier in clay pots. Once the weather warms up in March the danger of rot lessens somewhat as pots dry faster. At this time I now feed according to the system Ian Young of the Scottish Rock Garden Club uses for his hardy bulbs – a good sprinkling of potash powder on the surface of the pots to be watered in (overhead again) with the last few waterings as the bulbs approach their summer dormancy. The results from this have been pleasing so far.

Seed sowing takes place if possible in late August, Cape bulb seed sown much after late September tends to either not germinate, or damp off. I have usually followed the maxim of sowing thin papery seeds under just a covering of grit, with rounded seeds buried more deeply. A recent conversation with an eminent breeder of gladioli regarding my germination problems with the genus has made me realise that although they look papery they are not like fritillaria or lillium in that they are actually a plump rounded seed but just happen to have a papery surround – I will bury them more deeply in future! Some seeds prove very difficult to germinate at all – *Lapeirousia* and certain *romulea* are rather reticent for example.

Pest and disease problems are thankfully few. Mice are drawn to *massonia* in flower in late autumn and sometimes chew neighbouring shoots but mostly their damage is caused by their claws as they gain purchase on the slippery leaves to sip nectar from the flowers! By far the most damaging pest for me are Tortrix moth larvae which attack leaves and especially flowers of most bulbs (and my *disa* orchids), often they burrow into seed capsules and scoff the lot too!. They are even worse on the succulents where the damage takes much longer to grow out.

Some species of Cape bulb seem problematic for reasons more related to their physiology and/or incompatibility with our climate. *Ferraria* can sometimes skip a season or fail to flower if they do not get a sufficiently warm summer rest. This has been easy to deal with – I put the black pots of dormant *ferraria* tubers on a high shelf under the glass for the summer. *Moraea loubseri* also sometimes skips a year. More maddeningly some species germinate and grow the first season, then stay intact but dormant seemingly forever, no matter what I do. *Lapeirousia* are good at this, so is *Walleria gracilis* which has now been dormant for 3 years. I had hoped the hot summer of 2006 might solve the problem but no! Of course, there are other species which are trouble free from this respect but put all their energy into vegetative reproduction rather than flowering – I've hundreds of *Moraea lurida* originating from one packet of seed sown in 2000. I've never had a flower though!

In summary – there are challenges but seeing flowers throughout the winter when all else in the garden looks rather sad more than compensates. As I write in late December I have *Gladiolus maculatus*, *Massonia pustulata* and others at their peak of flowering.

## Sowing Seeds of Southern African Bulbous plants

I contacted members who have email facilities to ask them about sowing seeds of Southern African bulbous plants. I certainly learnt, as my old granny used to say 'There are more ways than one to skin a cat'. Below are some of replies received:-

I use a mix of 40% potting soil (pH 5.5 - 6.0) and 60% washed coarse river sand. This is for both seeds and all bulbs and corms that have already formed and is relative to most species from the Western Cape and Namaqualand.

For good germination do not plant the seeds too deeply - a 2cm covering of fine soil is generally sufficient for all seeds except for the very fine seed of *spiloxene*, some *ornithogalums* etc. - spread on the top of the soil and then keep moist, a fine spray works best for these. With all seed however, the pots/containers must never be allowed to dry out during the growing season. If you have a potting mix that drains well, the seeds/seedlings can never be over-watered!

When repotting existing bulbs and corms never plant too deep. Those which need the extra depth, such as *b abianas*, *lapeirousias* and *ferrarias* will pull themselves down to their optimum depth through the season - between 3 and 4 centimetres I find to be quite sufficient.

Gordon Summerfield

All my experience with seed has been related to alpine type compost. I have successfully reared *Polyxena longituba*, *P. ?ensifolia*, and *Massonia pygmaea*. The *Freesia viridis* may be the only one presenting a problem, probably due to overwatering - fingers crossed that some may come through. In short any well draining compost will work judging from your Australian writer and why not! It seems to me most seed will germinate in most composts, keeping it going is the problem.

Lionel Reuben

Edit: An Australian bulb grower uses coarse sand to germinate his seeds and then transplant to a well drained compost.

I hope I'll be able to send you a few notes on about 15 pots of seeds that I sowed in the autumn, most of which are coming up well, in ordinary compost (I think it was a mix of JI 3, ericaceous compost and grit). I tried some of them with some cold treatment (in the fridge and in the garden) to see whether this would have any effect (I don't think it did). More details later, maybe even some photos.

Richard White

I use a modification of my potting mix:- equal parts by volume of sieved John Innes, sieved peat free compost (New Horizon when I can get it), silver sand and fine

horticultural vermiculite. I soak the pots (2" or 2 3/4" B.E.F.) and compost in Chinosol diluted in very hot water prior to sowing, then top-dress with a thin layer of vermiculite. Most seeds seem to germinate quite readily in this mix. I usually pot on after the growing season after germination (18-24 months old) into a mix of 2 parts John Innes, 1 part peat free compost, 1 part coarse vermiculite, 1 part sharp sand and 1 part 5 mm grit, once again I top-dress this time with more grit.

Neil Oakman

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## An Apology and a Name

Firstly the apology; to those of you who were present at the October 06 meeting at Corfe Mullen. The bulbs I was selling as *Lycoris radiata alba* have turned out to be no such thing. They are a *Nerine*. I do not know which one. The flowers are a very pale silvery pink with a very slightly darker pink mid-stripe. I apologise for this, the only reason being that I had bought the bulbs and had never managed to flower them. I therefore presumed the identification I had been given was correct. If any of you would like a refund (as you would never have bought a *Nerine*) please let me know and I will send it to you.

Now the good news. For those of you who were present at the inaugural meeting at Epsom Downs. I was distributing plants of a *Scadoxus* species. Jonathan Hutchinson has now identified this plant as *Scadoxus membranaceus*. He says it is either a 'miniature' or 'rather a poor' form of the species. See picture on [www.smale1.demon.co.uk/G2\\_Amaryllids/G2\\_Scad\\_membran\(dwarf\).htm](http://www.smale1.demon.co.uk/G2_Amaryllids/G2_Scad_membran(dwarf).htm)

*Margaret Corina*

## ERRATUM

Newsletter No. 6 page 3 ' *Veltheimia bracteata* comes from the Eastern Cape, whereas the better known *V capensis* comes from the Western Cape.' Should read: '*V bracteata* comes from the Eastern Cape, whereas the LESSER known *V capensis* comes from the Western Cape.'

## Oxalis by Diana Chapman

Oxalis is an enormous genus which, according to some, encompasses about 800 different species, the majority coming from South America and South Africa. Apparently there are more South American species than any other, but the showiest, and those that exhibit the widest variety of leaf forms and flower colours are from Southern Africa. There is, unfortunately, a dearth of current literature available on the genus, with T. M. Salter's monograph "The Genus Oxalis in South Africa" having been written in 1944. This is still a valuable reference, although the key is very difficult to use. It is, however, incomplete, and the genus is in serious need of review.

The South African group of oxalis is enormous, with flowers in every colour imaginable except a true blue, and it is in this group that you find the greatest variety of leaf form. All of the Western Cape species are winter-growers, and most are not very hardy, being suitable for growing outdoors in USDA Zones 8-10 only. Since they bloom from autumn on through winter into mid-spring, they are best grown in containers for a greenhouse or porch, where they will brighten up the dreary winter months with their dazzling flowers.

Some (by no means all) of the South African species multiply vegetatively very rapidly, especially those in the *O. purpurea* group, and it is because of this that they are often accused of being "weeds". They rarely produce seeds, however, so if grown in containers, they will not take over your greenhouse or garden. Oxalis exhibit heterostyly, exhibiting at least three differing configurations of style, filaments and stamens within each species. To make seed, there has to be a 'match' in configuration, in addition to needing two plants of different genetic makeup, so, although seed production is possible, the chances are reduced.

Most of us don't grow bulbs for the beauty of their leaves, but oxalis would be worth growing even if they didn't flower, since the leaves can vary widely both in colour and form. Leaves can be red, green, purple, blue, yellowish, or splashed or streaked with different colours. And, although most species

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have the easily recognizable trifoliate leaves, they can also be finely dissected and ferny in appearance, arranged like small palm fronds, succulent, unifoliate, microscopically tiny, or very large. They can grow like a small tree with a short trunk (called caulescent), in tight mounds, or trail, but for the most part they grow very much like the cushion plants so loved by rock gardeners, holding their beautiful flowers above the foliage on thin wiry stems.

The flowers, though, are the reason most people grow Oxalis, and they come in a range of the most dazzling colours. *Oxalis obtusa* is my favourite, with flowers in shades of orange, from softest peach, salmon, tangerine, deep copper, and every shade in between, all with a contrasting ring of darker or different colour around the central yellow "eye", and darker veining on the petals. These bloom a little later than some of the other species, and are at their peak in February and March in the northern hemisphere. *O. obtusa* also comes in a wide range of pinks, yellows and white. The yellow flowered ones often have a metallic sheen to the petals. Flowers range from about 1.5cm to 4.0 in diameter, depending upon the particular clone, and are held on wiry stems about 6-8cm tall. When in bloom the plant is literally covered in blossoms that obscure the neat trifoliate leaves. The impression is that of an alpine cushion plant. Although *O. obtusa* multiplies fairly rapidly in cultivation, it is not at all invasive in gardens, in spite of the fact that this particular species seems to be better able to produce seed, possibly due to the fact that it has such an enormous range of varieties. *O. obtusa* seed, unlike most other species of *Oxalis*, can also remain viable over the summer. In my collection, I do get seedlings popping up here and there, but not with such frequency as to cause problems. New seedlings usually resemble those already present in my collection, but occasionally a seedling will show a different coloured eye ring. *O. obtusa* 'Peaches and Cream' originated this way, as did another (not introduced yet) called 'Elizabeth', with pale honey petals and a brilliant orange eye ring.

Other *Oxalis* species that should be in every collection include *O. flava* with dazzling yellow flowers and glaucous leaves that are like palm fronds with a thick succulent texture, and *O. fabaefolia* with yellow flowers and leaves that have two long leaflets that look like a rabbit's ears. *O. purpurea* also has a very wide range of colour from peach, tangerine, violet, all shades of pink, yellow and a lustrous white. *O. stenorrhyncha* grows like a small palm tree, with flowers that are intense terracotta red, and *O. glabra* has deep red flowers and ferny leaves atop a short stem.

Growing the South African *Oxalis* species couldn't be easier. Grow them in a pot, in a very lean mix with plenty of sharp grit for drainage. I use a pot that is about 13cm square and 15cm deep, and this has proved satisfactory for all the species I grow. They can do well in a smaller pot if space is limited. I fertilize them monthly with a liquid fertilizer, and only re-pot when crowded. Some oxalis only bloom well when they completely fill the pot, while others do the opposite, and stop blooming when they are too crowded. Once in growth, they should never be allowed to dry out, for this can throw them into premature dormancy, but after they go dormant, they should be kept completely dry. Mice and squirrels do eat them.

I have used different kinds of fertilizer and mix. Now I use a mix that is mostly horticultural pumice with about 20% ground fir bark. I'm not sure pumice is available in the UK, so granite grit or very coarse sand would do and it is slightly acidic. I use a low nitrogen fertilizer for all my bulbs, so I basically feed them all the same. I haven't used a no nitrogen fertilizer. I re-pot about every two years, discarding the old mix.

The tiny bulbs are often symmetrical; those of *O. obtusa* looking like a wrinkled spindle with points on both ends. Since it can be impossible to determine which is the bottom or top of these bulbs, they are best planted on their sides. One absolute requirement of all the South African oxalis, is that they have a



warm, dry dormancy. If summer temperatures are too cool, they will not break dormancy in the autumn when temperatures fall. A minimum temperature during dormancy would be about 20C. Moisture during dormancy can cause rotting.

Oxalis need as much light as you can possibly give them. This can be a challenge in low-light areas, but if grown with insufficient light they will become etiolated and floppy and lose their characteristic tight cushion-like form, and the flowers will not open, for, like crocus, they need sunshine to show their beauty.

High humidity can sometimes encourage fungal infections, and rust can affect the leaves. I have not found any fungicides to be necessary, but keep the pots well separated and keep a fan on them during their growth. Although I am in California I am not in the sunny part of it! My nursery is within sight of the Pacific Ocean in the northern part of the state where summer fog is the rule and winter rainfall can be extreme, so humidity is high here.

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A collection of oxalis is the best cure there is for the winter blues! For those of us infatuated with this lovely genus, we have the excitement of watching for the first leaves to emerge in autumn, punching through the surface of the soil like a tiny fist that then unfurls into an open hand. Then, with rising anticipation, we watch as more and more emerge, and the first autumn-blooming ones open their beautiful flowers. This gorgeous display lasts all winter, making the arrival of spring almost anti-climactic, but then the other South Africans take over, lachenalia, gladiolus, ferrarias and more. There is always something to look forward to.



*O. obtusa* Peach



*O. obtusa* Polished Copper



*O. obtusa* Buttercup

These pictures are taken from [www.telosrarebulbs.com](http://www.telosrarebulbs.com) with the permission of Diana.

### **Purchase Oxalis obtusa.**

Members wishing to purchase any of the *Oxalis obtusa* (See Website [www.telosrarebulbs.com](http://www.telosrarebulbs.com)) can contact me before 1<sup>st</sup> May and I will order a bulk amount and then distribute them to you. Bulbs will not be sent from U.S.A. until end June/beginning July and there will have to be extra charges for Phytosanitary Certificate, Postage and packing to U.K. and for forwarding. The bulbs do not weigh very much and the larger the order the less cost per bulb. On this occasion only *O. obtusa*, if this is successful then we can look at other plants.

### **Next Meeting**

On Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> September at Corfe Mullen Village Hall. The hall will be open from 10.30 - 4.00p.m.

Speaker: Mike Salmon Title to be announced

Instructions to the venue will be in the next Newsletter

Next Newsletter will be published in early September 2007.