



# The graceful, hardy Karoo lily

## *Ammocharis coranica*: Karoo lily

**A**S I MENTIONED LAST WEEK, I'M dealing with the plants in this series alphabetically. This should avoid any bias I might have toward particular plants, and also ensure that I cover a comprehensive range of species and aspects of conservation and biodiversity management that are of interest to farmers.

The Karoo lily (*Ammocharis coranica*) is a ubiquitous plant, equally at home in the dry Karoo and the moister grassland of the eastern and northern regions of the country. The name derives from its habitat and appearance: *amos* means "sand" and *charis* means "grace or beauty" in Greek, and *coranica* means "to do with Korana Bushmen" in Latin.

It is a robust, perennial bulbous plant belonging to the Amaryllidaceae family. The strap-like leaves spread on or near the ground, and the spectacular flower head is arranged in a rounded terminal cluster of tubular pink or crimson flowers. It generally occurs in massed populations, often in seasonally wet depressions. However, it is not confined to this habitat and can be found almost anywhere, often growing in hot, dry, flat areas with fairly deep soil.

Flowering can be any time from spring to mid-summer, and is opportunistic in the sense that it can be triggered by good rains and/or fire – under these

conditions flowering is spectacular. Populations do not necessarily flower every year, despite favourable conditions. Leaves start growing after flowering and are not persistent, the plant going dormant in dry spells and in winter.

### **Rugged seeds survive drought**

After flowering, large numbers of fleshy seeds are produced in membranous purses which eventually split when the seeds mature, depositing them around the plant. Distribution is very likely by stormwater runoff. Like most of the showy Amaryllids, *Ammocharis coranica* has recalcitrant seed – that is, fleshy seed that germinates spontaneously, producing a radicle (small root) and ultimately a small leaf. If the seed comes to rest in a

larger than in moister regions – a survival strategy that provides more sustenance for the developing plantlet, enabling it to wait patiently for the next wet spell.

While *Ammocharis* is a widespread genus with different species throughout Africa, *Ammocharis coranica* is one of only two members of the genus in South Africa. The second species is *A. longifolia* which, in contrast to *A. coranica*, has a winter growth pattern and is confined to the winter rainfall region, occurring from southern Namibia to the Cape Peninsula.

### **This lily won't harm livestock**

There is a common misconception that *Ammocharis* are poisonous to livestock. The foliage and flowers are in fact poisonous, but they are clearly unpalatable and are

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favourable situation, the radicle will take root and the young plant will develop. Failing this, the seed and embryonic plant will desiccate and die. However, I have found that seeds are very tough and can survive for a long time, sometimes months, in harsh conditions before they die. Plants that occur in more arid regions, for instance around Willowmore in the Eastern Cape, have less seed but it is much

seldom eaten by livestock. Only one case of suspected poisoning has ever come to my attention. Some years ago Johan Fouché of Lady Grey reported to me that eight cattle had died in proximity to a large population of *Ammocharis coranica* and he had noticed that the plants had been eaten. This was in the midst of a severe drought and the cattle were hungry. Although he took the rather extreme step of



destroying as many bulbs as he could find, he recently he confirmed there were still many plants on his farm and he had never had a recurrence of this experience. Farmers who are privileged to have populations of this beautiful Amaryllid on their property can rest assured that they are not harmful.

They make fantastic displays when in flower, are hardy, drought-resistant and withstand the pressure of grazing livestock.

There has been limited cultivation of the species from seed, and young bulbs are available from indigenous nurseries. They make beautiful subjects in rock gardens, and have a high horticultural potential for landscaping and public gardens in towns and villages in the more arid areas. Look out for them on your farm and learn to appreciate them more. – *Cameron McMaster (cameron@haznet.co.za)* |fw

**ABOVE FROM LEFT:**

Cattle living contently with a strong population of *Ammocharis coranica* on Chris Gibbens' farm Paradoxus in the Cathcart district, Eastern Cape. There is no danger of livestock poisoning from this plant.

Ripe seed about to drop, photographed beside a road near Willowmore, Eastern Cape.

*Ammocharis coranica* in flower on Chris Gibbens' farm Paradoxus.